silver and red

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by neonheartbeat

Summary

Abbot lifted his head to look down at her. “See, that’s the post-traumatic stress. Something happens that your brain decides is a life or death situation. You have a massive adrenaline kick while it’s all happening, and then when it’s bleeding out of you on the comedown, your brain throws out anything that’s not completely vital. The amount of car crash patients we have who don’t even remember coming to the ER when they submit requests for their medical records for insurance… the brain’s a weird thing, Mohan.”

“Yeah,” she said, shooting him a look out of the side of her eyes. “It can even make you convinced you have to hurt yourself in order to seek external validation when the most logical course of action is rest.”

He snorted softly, shaking his head and leaning it back. “God,” he muttered, his cheeks stained pink. “Robby was right. You should have gone into psych.”

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HOUR ELEVEN

4:00 - 5:00

"Mohan! Hey! Earth to Mohan! New intake, contusion to the head above the left orbital socket."

Oh! Right, right, that's me! Dr. Samira Mohan shook herself out of her exhausted reverie at the call from Dana and flicked on her penlight as she rushed past the nurses' station, examining both eyes of the young man who'd just been wheeled into the bay. His purpling left eye was almost entirely swollen shut. She catalogued it with the swift accuracy built over the past years of medical school and residency in the emergency medicine department. "Laceration just above the eyebrow, bleeding. Right pupil reactive, left… I can't quite get a visual." She stepped back as Santos charted it. "Hi. I'm Dr. Mohan. What's your name?"

"Uh… Braxton," moaned her patient, clutching his arm.

"Hi, Braxton. What happened here? You hit your head?" He was wearing a bloodstained plaid shirt and jeans. Cowboy boots. Reeked of beer. Probably a bar fight, if she had to assume, but she never assumed: that was not her job.

"Threw a punch at a guy trying to steal my girl," he muttered, peeling back his hand and releasing a flow of dark red blood from the cut that ran so deep along the inside of his forearm that yellow fat was exposed. *So it was a bar fight. Called it.*

"Oh, *shit,"* said Santos with awe, large green eyes opened about as wide as plates. "Stitches?"

"Yeah, and you can even do them," said Mohan, half-smiling and shaking her head as she elevated Braxton's arm above his chest. "So how'd *this* happen?" she asked, indicating the gash on his forearm.

"Uh, shit. Uh…" He blinked his good eye, wincing. "Fell on the bar. Something smashed."

Blood was dripping off the gurney, puddling around her sneakers. She mostly tried not to slip in it as she stepped to the head of the bed and

gently pried his swollen eye open. “You hit your head at all?” His pupil was reactive after all: that was good. Lower chance of head trauma.

“Just when he punched me.”

“All right.” Santos scurried back in with a sterile pack: needles, sutures, alcohol wipes. “Santos here is going to stitch you up and stop the bleeding in your arm; that takes priority over the eye. Perlah?”

“Yeah?” The nurse was just passing the curtain of the bay, but she paused and glanced back, dark eyes attentive and alert.

“Can you find Braxton here an ice pack for his eye? Observation for two hours, just to make sure there aren’t any complications.”

“Do I get pain meds before you jab a freakin’ needle into me?” Braxton was asking Santos nervously as she threaded the curved suture needle and set it into a sterile tray.

“Your lucky day, dude,” Santos told him, prepping an injection of Lidocaine. Mohan smiled to herself as she left and headed over to the next patient on her rotation, an elderly woman who’d gotten lost and disoriented in the night and wound up by the freeway. Firefighters had brought her in. Still no sign of any next of kin: the police were working on that, apparently, though how fast they could get that done at four in the morning was still a question waiting to be answered. She paused at the bed and gave her what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Hi, ma’am,” she said brightly. “You doing okay?”

“Oh… my son’s picking me up,” said the woman faintly, nodding as her eyes drifted across the ER and her hands fidgeted at her fingers.

“That’s wonderful. We’ll be right here when he does, okay?”

“Okay,” she mumbled, settling back against the pillow. Mohan tucked her in and kept moving, checking her chart.

Early morning shifts were not all that bad, actually. She’d decided that a few weeks into the new shift hours she’d been given— a prerequisite for her residency. Had to learn the ins and outs of both night and day shifts if she was going to be a physician. Sure, there was still a constant flow of injuries— bar fights and drunk drivers who had crashed into guardrails and panicked new moms trying to figure out

why their babies were crying— but there was a weird peace in knowing that outside, most of the world was asleep. That the night team had it under control. That they'd hand off in the morning to Dr. Robby, who'd let them all go home and get some sleep.

And also that Dr. Abbot was the lead EMP. That, too, was comforting.

Mohan checked the next patient's chart, her conscious brain noting the information— young woman, presenting with nausea and lower GI issues, pregnancy test negative, pale and dehydrated— and put herself on autopilot, cheerfully asking questions, making conversation: *did you eat anything out of the ordinary? Did you drive here yourself? Yeah? Okay. Do you have a friend who can take you home?* Meanwhile, her subconscious noted other things. Like the fact that Santos was stripping off bloody gloves by the hazmat can, and that someone was handling the blood puddle left by Braxton's bed. As she put an IV into the woman's elbow for hydration and noted it on the chart, a commotion burst into life by the ambulance bay doors. Mohan stood up, wondering what the hell had happened and briefly feeling her stomach drop into her feet— *oh, God, not another mass shooting, please* — before seeing Dr. Abbot's compact form, black scrubs and sneakers, go hustling off toward the group coming in: EMTs, a gurney— a police officer?

"What the hell's *that?"* asked one of the night nurses, eyebrow raised.

"Mohan!" barked Abbot, turning his curly, silvering head and searching out the room. By the time he'd found her and waved her over, she was already at the nurses' station changing her gloves. "Car accident. Suspected stroke."

"Stroke?" Mohan leaned over the woman, checking her pulse. "Ma'am, can you tell me your name?"

"Can't… breathe," gasped the patient. About sixty-five, maybe: well-dressed woman, pearl necklace, cardigan, flowery skirt. "Was— coming home. Church. Bible study. Oh, God."

"Ma'am, you said you're having trouble breathing?"

"Any arm pain?" asked Dr. Abbot.

"No, no… my leg."

"Leg," said Mohan, her mind flipping through possible diagnoses: had she broken her leg in the crash? She lifted the woman's skirt and

looked up at Dr. Abbot. “Left leg is swollen, varicose veins present.”

“Diagnosis, Dr. Mohan?” he asked, listening with his stethoscope pressed up against the woman’s chest.

“I think it’s a DVT that shook loose in the car. Pulmonary embolism.”

“You think, or you know? If I send her up to Pulmo and it’s a stroke, that’s not gonna be good.”

She’d long ago stopped dithering over being cautious with her diagnoses and plans of action when her instincts told her to. “Patient exhibits no symptoms consistent with a stroke but every symptom of a DVT. Risk factors, including age, varicose veins— and her leg here is warm to the touch, which to me suggests that only part of the clot may have dislodged and gotten into her heart or lungs. She needs Heparin to handle the clotting and an ultrasound to check.”

Dr. Abbot nodded, his lips pursing, and turned back to the patient. “Mrs. Pamela McCall, right? You’re gonna be fine. Let’s— yeah, thank you, Tim, get that set up for her.”

Mohan stepped aside as Abbot followed. “Why the cop?” she asked, watching the officer chatting with the EMTs.

“According to Jesse, she crashed her car right into a Pittsburgh PD cruiser following a suspect that robbed a dispensary. They have to rule out any involvement.” His dark eyes glittered with faint amusement, and Mohan had to press her lips together to not laugh in the middle of the ER— the idea that a pearl-wearing retired lady in a cardigan could be involved in a dispensary robbery was just—

“Uh, Dr. Abbot?” asked Whitaker, appearing from behind a curtain and stopping short as he saw them. “I— I need— I—” He swallowed, and Mohan noted he was sweating— actually kind of pale. Well, paler than normal. “I need a second opinion,” he said faintly. A baby was crying hysterically behind the curtain, long shrieking wails that did not stop.

“Are you okay?” Mohan asked immediately, grabbing a juice box off a cart and handing it to him. “You look like you’re going to faint.”

“Chart?” asked Abbot, and Whitaker handed it over as he took the juice box and opened it with shaking hands. Mohan sat down with him in one of the plastic chairs along the nurses’ station, and Abbot read through the chart, his face blank and quiet.

Mohan checked Whitaker's pulse. Thready, rapid, skin clammy. "Hey, you take five, okay?"

"I can't. I have more rotations. I have more. I have—"

"Whitaker, there's like twenty of us down here right now. The world won't end if you take a breather." Mohan glanced back up, confused, but Abbot was already heading into the room with the screaming baby, black scrubs disappearing behind the pale striped curtain. "That was the crying baby, right? I thought you said you had siblings," she said lightly, aiming for a gentle, teasing tone.

Whitaker froze where he sat for a moment, then leaned over swiftly, snatched a bucket off a passing supply cart, and threw up in it. Mohan kept her hand on his back and held the bucket. What had gotten into him? Whitaker had a stomach of steel. He'd killed a rat with his bare hands and a blanket, stitched up countless horrifying injuries, been doused in everything from pus to blood to that one C.diff infection that had aired out the whole ER for an hour— what about a baby case could possibly—

And then Abbot came back around the curtain but he wasn't really there, not anymore, not behind the eyes. "Mohan," he said pleasantly, a veneer, a facade of civil quietness. "Would you please go find Emma and bring her to Pedes. Tell her it's urgent. Now."

"Yes, sir," she said automatically, getting up and turning around and bolting for the nurses station, because if the family support specialist, who stood in as the social worker on duty during night shift, was getting involved this meant— this— "Perlah! Where's Emma, have you seen her?" she called as she passed the Hub.

"Break room!" Perlah called back, phone under her chin. Mohan turned back around and headed for the break room, using her hips to open the door. Emma was standing up from her seat, an empty cup of coffee in her hand, and they made eye contact for a single eternal second.

"Abbot sent me. He needs you. Now." Mohan could almost hear her thoughts. How if Dr. Abbot had sent her and not Santos or another intern or a nurse to find her then it was serious, and he wanted to impart that seriousness.

"Which room?" Emma asked quietly.

"Pedes."

“All right. You get back to rotations. See you later.”

She didn’t see a lot of Abbot for the next forty minutes. Not that she noticed, but Whitaker was also kind of absent from the halls as she went in and out of her rounds. *They’re probably in with Emma,* she thought absently, checking the chart of an elderly homeless man who’d been pulled in from the street half-comatose with a cat on a leash in his custody. They’d figured he had diabetes and revived him with insulin— put the cat in the empty behavioral room with some tuna— but now the man was getting combative about his mud-caked, worn out old boots, so they’d asked Mohan to see if she could sweet talk him.

“Hi, sir!” she chirped, as nicely as possible without gagging. The smell coming off him made her wish she’d grabbed peppermint oil from the supply cabinet to put in her mask. “You having some trouble with your shoes? We just want to give you a check and make sure you don’t have any infections.”

He muttered a string of unintelligible sounds at her, the difficulty compounded by the fact he did not really have a lot of teeth left, and flipped her off. Mohan took a breath. “Okay, sir. I understand you don’t want to be here. I promise you we’ll give your boots back. I don’t want to have to tie you down, okay? You wanna work with me here? You’ll get them back. Cross my heart.”

He eyed her up suspiciously, then nodded sharply and thrust his left foot out. Eric, one of the night nurses, tugged gently at the boot. Nothing happened. “You think they fused with his feet?” he whispered.

“I hope not,” mumbled Mohan, blue-gloved hands around the ankle. “Okay, sir. Just a little—”

Something went *click* under her hands, deep inside the shoe, and the whole boot came off.

And his foot, judging by the stump of bone and dribbling, necrotic flesh, had come with it.

Eric gagged, skidded to the side, and hurled into a trash can. Mohan took several shallow, quick breaths through her mouth and maintained her composure to the symphony of Eric retching, the baby that was still screaming in Pedes, and the countless beeps of the room around them. *I am a doctor. I am in a nice white jewelbox of a hospital*

and outside can't bother me and I am going to do my job. The man on the bed hadn't even noticed his foot was gone: he was lying down, mumbling to himself, and staring at the ceiling.

"Okay, sir," she said pleasantly. "Let's get the other one, and then we'll see about maybe getting you sent up for—

"Hey, Mohan, have you seen Dr. Abbot— oh, *shit,"* said Santos, horrified delight on her face as she rounded the curtain and took it all in: Eric bent double, Mohan holding a rotten foot in a boot, gangrenous leg of the man in the bed.

"No, I have not, and would you please not stare at patients like they're a circus or a TikTok video?"

Santos already had her elbow up over her mouth. "Sorry! Oh, my God. I'll ask around for disinfectant spray and, like, a gallon of peppermint oil."

Mohan gestured with the boot. "Please do! Now!"

The intern vanished. Mohan turned back to the bed. "Eric, I need you up on the floor."

"Oh, my god, oh my god," Eric was chanting to the bottom of the trash can.

"I need you to get the other boot off him and we need to set up an IV. Antibiotics to combat the gangrene and any possible sepsis, and once he's stable we need to send him up to the OR to complete— Eric, write this down. Come on." Eric struggled up, grabbed a pen, and tried not to look at the chart as Mohan set the boot down on the gurney and checked the exposed bone. "He's going to need a bilateral BKA."

"Got it, got it." Santos came back in bearing peppermint oil, waving the vial around in the air like she was trying to banish a ghost. It helped. Some. "Okay, antibiotics, IV, BKA. That's all?"

"Yep. Okay. Let's get that other boot off."

"Do we have to?"

"It can't stay on. Let's go." She lifted the man's leg gently, and Eric steeled himself, unlaced the boot, and pulled slowly and gently, probably in a kind, but misguided effort to save the foot inside, and

off came both.

“He doesn’t even feel it,” said Santos, astonished.

“Diabetic neuropathy,” Mohan told her, setting the boots between the man’s shins. “Okay, Eric. You get that line worked. I need— I—” Her stomach roiled. She didn’t finish her sentence, aimed a thumbs-up at the homeless man, who shot her a wavery one right back, and headed right out to the floor. God, she hoped the cat was in better shape; she stumbled away from the Hub— she did *not* want to sit in the break room and stink the place up. The stench of rotting death was on her clothes, her hair, her mask: she ripped her gloves off and shuddered, fighting the urge to rip her stupid scrubs off in the middle of the ER as she headed straight for the behavioral room, yanking the door open, slamming it behind her, and stumbling toward the furthest corner from the door she could, fighting her gag reflex.

Except someone had already beaten her to it. Silvery curls, lined, worn face. Cat in his lap, purring so loud it almost drowned out his quiet words. “Hi, Mohan,” he said wearily, head against the wall. “Wow. Two pukers in a day?”

“Ha,” she forced out, swallowing. “I’d be three, actually. Eric’s probably got his head in a hazmat disposal unit again by now.”

“Well, there’s no can in here. You good?”

“Necrotic lower extremities from complications of untreated diabetes —” The gentle snap, the crack under her hands, echoed through her hands, her fingers, her palms. She clenched her hands, shuddering again as her gorge rose. “His foot broke off,” she whispered, inhaling. “Came off. In his boot. When I tried to take it off. I know I— I know it was inevitable, it just— it— that was a lot.”

“Yeah, it’s all a lot this morning, huh?” His fingers were working busily at the cat’s orange chin. Ears almost flat to the side, purring, eyes shut. She focused on his fingers, on the movement. Deft and precise. Not a single useless movement. “I have two more minutes on the five I gave myself. How about you join me?”

“Are you okay?” she asked, sliding down and sitting cross-legged on the floor by his feet.

“Well, I didn’t break anyone’s foot off. You order a BKA?”

“Bilateral,” she corrected. “It was both of his feet.”

He whistled softly, his thin mouth pursing, but there was nothing but compassion in his dark eyes. “Damn. Not a fun way to lose ‘em, huh?”

“I don’t know about that. He couldn’t feel a thing.” She leaned back and let her head rest against the wall, closing her eyes and breathing in deeply. “You’re not worried that the cat has fleas or worms or something?” she asked, eyes still shut.

“Nah. I’ll wash my hands.”

The snap-crack flitted through her mind again, bringing her knees up to her chest, her fists clenched tight against her torso as she fought it. *Snap. Crack. Squelch.* The smell, the smell and she didn’t want to think about this at all, not ever again but her brain would not stop replaying it, her hands were shaking, her—

“Mohan,” said Abbot gently. “Hey. Look at me.”

So she did: pulled her head up and sucked in a breath and forced herself to unfold her body, to look at him. “I don’t know why this is hitting me like this,” she managed, her voice shaking. “I’ve seen way worse in triage. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I just—”

“Hey, hey. We don’t pick what our brains do, right? Here. Hold this.” He slid himself closer and plopped the orange cat on her lap, that warm heavy weight on her thighs. Automatically, she let her fingers slip through its fur. Coarse, a little dirty and matted but warm, soft: she scratched the cat under the chin and it purred, quietly vibrating through her. The steady sensation helped to chase off the constantly replaying cycle of her brain reminding her of *snap, crack, squelch,* and she smiled down as the cat stretched out its front legs and braced itself against her calf muscle, eyes shut. “Look at that. See? He’ll fit in here at the Pitt just fine; he likes you.” Abbot gave her a quiet smile, the silver in his stubble glinting in the light.

Mohan couldn’t help but smile back. “Yeah? I don’t know. If he wants to hang around, he’s gonna have to get used to some crazy shit,” she said as her fingers worked through a matted tangle of greasy orange fur.

“Nah, he’ll be great. He can handle anything. Doctor Cat, MD. We can make him a little white coat.”

She laughed aloud. “A mascot. Perfect. We’ll put his picture up at the Hub.”

Abbot chuckled softly, reaching out and petting the cat again. “Well, my two minutes are up. You want to keep him entertained for another three?”

“I think I will, yeah.”

“Good.” He heaved himself up to his feet in a movement that seemed strangely unbalanced for a man in the shape he was. “Do me a favor? You see cops come in asking for Emma and you don’t see me on the floor, you send ‘em to me.”

“In Pedes?”

“That’s right. See you around, Mohan.” Abbot left, closing the door behind him, and it wasn’t until another thirty seconds of her remaining three minutes had gone by that Mohan realized he’d never answered the question when she’d asked *are you okay.* Instead he’d subtly passed it back; made it about her and not him. And since it kept her mind off the necrotic foot, she scratched the cat behind its ears and made herself focus instead on Dr. Abbot.

Quiet. Incredibly professional: hardly ever talked about his personal life. All she knew was that he was a combat veteran of some kind, and other small things he’d dropped here and there over the past six months she’d been doing her residency here had started to paint the picture of a man who was deeply passionate about medicine, veteran issues holding a spot close to his heart— a man who wasn’t shy about using unconventional methods to save lives no matter how much hospital admin got on his ass about it. Living alone. No wedding band, no mention of any pets (not that being a physician really allowed for pets, those long, long shifts like the one she was slogging through now). A few times he’d mentioned owning a police scanner, as if that was a normal thing for an ER attending doctor to possess. And she wondered how old he actually was, sometimes— something about him that she couldn’t put her finger on suggested that he’d aged prematurely, whether it was something in his past or the stress of being a supervising emergency medical physician. The silver hair, the creased lines of his face, the short silver-red stubble that coated his cheeks and jaw— none of those were congruous with his aptitude for tech or how quick he was on his feet.

She checked her watch. Three minutes were up. Gently, she dislodged the cat and stood, taking a breath. *Okay. Wash my hands, change my scrubs just in case. God knows what this cat has. And then, back to work.*

HOUR TWELVE

Chapter Notes

this is the chapter where the child abuse is mentioned pls take care of urselves

5:00-6:00

The new scrubs were slightly too big, but they were comfortable, and as Mohan walked back toward Room 18 to check her elderly, confused dementia patient again, she caught sight of her other patient, the bar fight. Braxton was clutching his arm, breathing heavily, and looking pale, and more blood was soaking through the sleeve of his shirt. “Whoa,” she said, diverting into his room. “Hey, Braxton. You okay? What happened?”

“Man, I don’t know,” he said, strained. “Something went, like, pop or something, and I started bleeding like crazy.”

“Santos!” called Mohan, cutting back his sleeve. The stitches the intern had put in were neat, evenly spaced, but she’d used the wrong type— continuous sutures, and one of them had popped, which had unraveled half the laceration. Gaping wound edges seeped dark red blood.

Dr. Abbot came in, eyes on the arm, already sliding his gloves on. “Santos is running an errand over on the north side. Popped a stitch?”

“Yeah, she did continuous sutures. Probably thought it was faster on time, but it’s a weaker stitch and this laceration’s deep in some spots. Glass cut.”

“You know how to do a vertical mattress?” Abbot laid out an injection of lidocaine.

“I’ve done them in a clinical setting, not— not like this. But I do know how to do horizontal mattress sutures.”

He nodded, then addressed the patient. “Sir, can you feel any pain?”

“Shit, yeah, Doc,” said Braxton, wincing. “That hurts.”

“All right. Let’s move fast, we don’t need more blood loss. Mohan, administer the lido. I’m gonna demonstrate a vertical for you.

Horizontal would work, but there's an increased risk of dermal strangulation and necrosis." Abbot threaded the curved needle and lifted the needle holders delicately in his fingers as Mohan injected the wound up and down with lidocaine. "Watch closely. You just take a nice big bite. Five to ten millimeters from wound edge." She watched, transfixed, as he slid the needle in deftly, perfectly, pulling the black thread out and up and looping it back down before sliding it into the opposite side and repeating. "You're gonna get so good at this that you'll be able to do it without even looking," he said softly, and Mohan, half-hypnotized by the slide and pull and stitch down the ten-inch laceration, watched, transfixed. In and over and up and out, leaving the skin snugly pressed close. Tie off. Repeat. She glanced over at him and saw that he was looking directly at her, his face inches away from hers. "Ah-ah-ah. Don't look at me, Dr. Mohan, look at my hands. I'm only gonna do this once for you."

Heat flooded her neck as she focused back on his fingers. In and out and over and through and out and up and over. Tie off. He wasn't even looking at his own hands, he was looking at *her* . *Effective way to illustrate a statement, I guess.* But why was it making her feel like her ears were tingling? In and out and through and out and up and over. Tie off. Their patient had his eyes closed, breathing evenly. It was really just them in the room: her and Dr. Abbot. *Stop being stupid. He's showing you a technique. He's a fantastic doctor. He— he—*

"And there we go," he said, tying off the last stitch. Mohan knew how to tie a stitch off, could do that in her sleep, so she turned her head and looked right at him as he tied it off, still not looking at his own hands but at her. A small smile ticked at the corner of his mouth as he set the needle holder and dirty needle aside. "Done. All right." He snapped off his gloves. "Get him cleaned up again. Maybe a hospital gown. And check pulse and ox— if he lost too much blood we'll need a transfusion."

"Yes, sir," she said smoothly. "Thank you for the demonstration."

"Sure thing. Hey, Perlah! Can you grab someone to come down here for a mop in 19?" He left, and Mohan was left to tidy up her patient, which she did, her fingers unconsciously mimicking the stitchwork. In and out and through and out and up and over. Vertical mattress. She'd get that down pat if it took her the rest of her shift.

As Mohan was finishing up her check on the disoriented old lady who was still waiting on family to come get her, she saw the doors opening

from the waiting room and two dark blue uniforms coming in. *Oh, shit. Cops. Pedes. Abbot.* She glanced around to see if anyone was directing them to where they needed to go, but Perlah was assisting near Trauma 1 and Dana was on what looked like two phones at the same time, so Mohan checked to make sure her patient was asleep (and she was: good pulse, good ox, normal respiration) before striding over to the two officers. “Hi,” she said firmly. “Dr. Mohan. Are you looking for Ms. Isaacs? Emma?”

One of them nodded. “Yes, ma’am.” He didn’t offer any information beyond that, and Mohan stripped her gloves off, nodding toward Pedes.

“I’ll show you to Pedes. They’re waiting for you in there.”

As they walked past the nurses’ station and into the short, wide hallway that led to the north side of the department, Mohan dimly noted she could still hear that baby screaming: what was going on in there? Then, through the unfrosted parts of the glass door, she saw the commotion— a young woman was shaking her finger in Whitaker’s face— Whitaker, of all people, the quietest and nicest doctor they probably had here— with her face bright red. It wasn't just the baby screaming, it was the mother. As she turned to look out the door, probably noticing the movement in the hall, she saw the police and Mohan, whirled around, vanished from the part of the door Mohan could see— Whitaker was talking, saying something, still visible and then the woman kicked the door open, screaming, red-faced nine-month-old in her arms. She wore a large sweatshirt, a pair of leggings, and had long, well-kept blonde hair and thick, black, false eyelashes, her cheeks blotchy as she clutched her wailing child.

“You are not stealing my goddamn baby!” she shrieked, loud enough that they could probably hear her all the way up on the roof. Emma came out, hands upraised in a gesture that was probably meant to be deescalating. “Fuck you! Fuck you and fuck this hospital, she’s just got a fucking diaper rash and you’re out here calling the fucking cops, I am *not* a bad mother—”

“Ma’am, I’m gonna need you to calm down,” Mohan began, wondering if this was all some kind of horrible misunderstanding. “You’re holding your child, and if you drop her—”

The woman whirled on her. “Oh, you’re saying you want me to drop her? Huh? You’re gonna blame me for that, too?”

Emma was talking over the screaming, loud and clear. “Ma’am, we are mandated reporters and this is simply procedure. I am sorry that you are upset, but it’s out of our—”

“Oh, *fuck* you!”

Abbot rounded out of the room, one hand out. “Mohan, get security,” he said tersely, and beckoned one of the officers back into the room.

The mother’s voice rose in a hysterical scream. “The government is stealing my baby! The fucking government is stealing my—”

Mohan raised her hands. “Whoa, whoa, nobody is stealing anyone’s—”

“Ma’am, you really need to put your child down for your own safety,” Whitaker was insisting, his voice shaking, and Emma was talking and Mohan thought, lifting her chin: *I can handle this, whatever it is, I can talk her down.* They didn’t need security. This woman was scared and just needed someone to empathize with her. Right?

“I know you’re really upset, ma’am,” she tried as she inched closer to her, hands out. “Hey. I get it, it’s early in the morning, your baby’s been crying all night, you’re frazzled, right? How about you let me hold—”

The woman planted her feet, hauled back like a boxer, and punched Mohan right in the face. Pain exploded through her skull as she folded and went straight down like a camping chair, the floor coming up hard against her shoulder. Her vision blurred. Lights flashed. *Shit,* she thought dimly, bewildered by the pain, *shit, orbital fracture or nasal? Or both?* Hot, sticky blood coated her lips, her tongue. Pain burned. There was a lot of noise going on above her. The woman was screaming, the baby was screaming, and the police officer was yelling, but she couldn’t quite register any of it as she sucked in little breaths and tried to push herself up off the floor. Then a pair of hands found her torso, sure and compact and strong, and lifted her up to a seated position, pushing her head down between her knees.

“Stay there,” said Abbot’s voice, and she closed her eyes, ashamed, as the sounds of the police arresting the woman filled her ears along with the inconsolable baby’s wails. She reached up to touch her upper lip and her fingers came away red and tacky. Whitaker knelt down by her with an alcohol wipe, clearing the worst of the mess off her chin and cheeks.

“Hey, first time being punched, right?” he said, trying for a joke. “I

think the nurses had a bet going on how long it would be for you."

Ordinarily, she would have found that funny. It was not funny now. "I have… really high patient satisfaction," she said dimly, her face throbbing with every heartbeat. Her lip stung like fire where the alcohol wipe touched it, and she probed it with her tongue.

"Yeah, well. Nobody's immune. Can't please them all. Here. Hold this on your nose." His fingers danced over her face, testing the give of her orbitals and her nasal bones. "Doesn't feel like anything's broken. We'll send you up for X-rays to make sure."

And waste the rest of her shift? "It's fine. I'm fine."

"Okay, well, you technically hit your head when you fell, uh, and that means a workplace incident form and X-rays."

"I have rotations. I have three more hours. I'm fine."

"Whitaker." That was Dr. Abbot, coming back from the bay doors, and she closed her eyes, not wanting to have the conversation she knew was coming and was dreading. "Have someone mop up the floor and send the cultures from Pedes up to the lab. Mohan, with me."

Shit. She struggled up to her feet and put a hand on the wall, her head swimming: maybe she had hit her head. Abbot's face was a weatherbeaten mask of stony silence as he used his penlight to check her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said before he could say anything.

"Reactive pupils, no concussion. What are you sorry for?" He said it like she was a kid being forced to apologize after knocking over a birthday cake. Prompting. Hard. Quiet.

"I'm sorry for not— I should have just gotten security."

"Yes, you should have," he said tightly, switching off the light and reaching for her cheek. "Laceration to the upper lip, not deep. I'll get you a butterfly bandage. You can wear a mask until the swelling goes down so our patients don't think their doctor is running a fight club out of the parking garage. Not great for patient satisfaction results." It did not sound like a joke.

"I'm sorry," she said again, her eyes stinging.

Silently, he walked her to the nurses' station, grabbed a bandage, and steered her into the break room, where he shoved a trash can under

the door handle and sat her down at the table. “Hold this,” he said, handing her the sterile wrapper as he cleaned her face off.

“Blocking the door of the break room violates the union poli—”

“Yeah, well, I don’t give a fuck. Look at me.” She did, her heart in her feet, and forced herself to maintain eye contact. “When I tell you to get security, Dr. Mohan, you do not stand there and try instead to talk down the mother of my patient, who you don’t know, have had no prior contact with, have not built a rep with, and are not equipped to handle. You are one of the most compassionate and talented doctors we have in this hospital, which makes you an incredible asset, but sometimes you have a hard time differentiating between being actually helpful and being self-righteous.” Embarrassed tears slid down her face, uncontrollable and unwanted, as Abbot unfolded the butterfly bandage and pressed it to her split lip. His tone softened a little. “Normally, my 3R’s don’t have enough confidence. It’s nice to balance the scales, but we gotta work on that. Okay?”

“Yes, sir,” she choked. “What— what was the— the whole—” but she couldn’t get the words out past the lump in her throat. “What was going on?”

Abbot exhaled long and hard, sitting back in his seat. “Patient, nine months old,” he finally said, his voice detached and distant as if someone else was saying it. “Presented with constant crying, mother concerned. Physical examination by Dr. Whitaker showed injuries consistent with abuse. Upon further questioning, it seems Mom was dropping off the baby at Dad’s every week, and Dad lives in a house full of people with prior assault and child exploitation charges, two of whom are also Twitch streamers.” Mohan’s stomach twisted, her ears pounding. “So now Emma gets to make a really fun call to the FBI, because there’s a strong possibility that material of this baby being—” His throat moved as he swallowed hard. “Harmed online exists. Although, since she punched you, Mom’s catching an assault charge, which means the kid’s placement into foster care and eventual therapy will be a lot faster. So maybe you did kind of do my patient a favor. In a roundabout way.”

She didn’t know what to say. There wasn’t anything to say. “Fuck,” she settled on.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Fuck. And now we compartmentalize, and we move on. If the world ended, you know, if we let ourselves fall apart every time we saw an abused kid in the ER, we wouldn’t have anyone

left to practice medicine."

"I'm— I'm sorry," she said again as he stood up and moved the trash can.

"Don't be sorry. Be better next time. Do what I tell you to do, when I tell you to do it. Okay?"

"Yes, sir. Do I really need to go get X-rays?"

He removed his gloves and tossed them. "Yep. Procedure for workplace incidents, doubly important because this is now part of an active investigation and an arrest. Document everything. Whitaker and I will go halfsies on your rotations until you're back down, and Dr. Collins is coming in at five-thirty: we can offload a few cases to her. If you want to go home, you can. When do you get off? Eight, right?"

"Yeah," she whispered, nodding. "Yeah, eight exactly. But I don't want to go home, I don't want to do that to the team. It— it was my mistake, and I'll take responsibility and if that means I do my rounds with a fat lip then that's what it means."

Abbot's eyes crinkled, ever so slightly. The barest, nascent formings of a smile. Even that made her feel better. "All right," he said. "Mm. Okay. You head on up to Radiology and get yourself looked at. And take your time. That's an order. We'll cover you as long as you need. We've got five students coming in to observe the floor in the next hour, so if you really want to freak them out, you know, send 'em down here."

"Will do," she said, feeling lighter already. "You want me to try to call Animal Control about the cat in Behavioral?"

"Pittsburgh SPCA, please. I like that cat. How's his owner doing?"

"Sent up to the OR fifteen minutes ago for his bilateral BKA." She got up and touched her lip, glancing in the mirror over the sink of the break room. A chunk of black hair had come loose from her braid, and she scraped it back flat, pinning it down against her scalp. Apart from the swelling around her mouth, she looked surprisingly in better shape than she'd expected. *I should really learn how to take a punch.* "I'll see if Dana can reach the SPCA. They do a temporary foster placement program for pets of unhoused people when they have the funds."

"Good. All right. You take care, okay?" Abbot opened the door for her,

standing aside, and she slid past him just close enough to feel the heat off his body, catch a slight scent of soap and disinfectant. And then it was gone: Mohan stepped out into the hall, took a deep breath, and headed for the elevator.

HOUR THIRTEEN

6:00-7:00

Even though she'd been pushed to the front of the line for an X-ray, it was still taking forever to be seen, and after she'd finished filling out her incident paperwork Mohan spent her time in the waiting room of Radiology practicing vertical mattress stitches in the air, as if she held invisible needle grippers. A man with a broken leg was half-asleep in a wheelchair across from her, a little girl with her arm in a brace curled up sleeping on her mother. Several other patients had come in early for appointments: mammograms, ultrasounds. Outside, the world was stirring to life, waking up again. Maybe the sun was coming up. Without windows, there was no way to tell. She closed her eyes and visualized the stitches. Skin. Flesh. Yellow fat. The needle, silver. The blood, as red as—

"Dr. Mohan?" called the radiology tech, opening the door and gesturing at her as she started upright and stood. "Hi. I'm Angie. Sorry for the wait."

"It's fine, I understand. Kind of a backlog this morning. You guys doing okay up here?" Mohan followed her back to the X-ray machine.

"Not as bad as you guys down there. Heard you got punched by a cop."

Mohan tried not to smile. It hurt her lip. "No, a really angry woman. Who then got arrested by the cops."

Angie lifted up the lead smock and paused, surprised. "Oh, shit. Well, happens to the best of us. Okay. You don't have to take off your shirt, just check yourself. Any metal items, underwire bra, whatever, you know the drill. You pregnant? I have to ask."

Not unless I'm a medical miracle who started spontaneously reproducing.
"Ha. No." Mohan slipped her bobby pins free of her hair and patted down her pockets, taking out the pen and marker she kept in there. Long ago, she'd stopped wearing bras with metal in them to work, choosing to go for comfortable, soft support bralettes with plastic adjustment buckles on the straps. Off came her watch, and then the tech slipped the lead apron on her and stood her in front of the X-ray machine. "I know, don't move," she told her, nodding as the technician went behind the divider and the machine hummed,

clicking. She hoped this could be done quickly. God, her face ached. Maybe she could grab some acetaminophen from the pharmacy. Maybe if she asked nicely, Abbot would write her a prescription.

“Okay,” said Angie, coming back around. “Looks good on the screen, no chipped teeth, not even a hairline fracture. You’re probably just going to be really puffy until the swelling goes down. Tougher than you look, Dr. Mohan.”

Mohan was already getting dressed again. “Thanks. Uh, I need a copy of the results. I think the assault is probably going to be part of a court case.”

“Okay. I’ll have them typed up and sent to you. Your work email okay?”

“Yes, thank you. And CC Admin on it, would you?”

“No problem.” Angie checked her watch. “Shoot, I’m due for my med school tour.”

“Residents?”

“You wish. Bunch of radiology kids in their first year. Never been to a teaching hospital before. I get to let them observe everything. Mammogram, ultrasound, CT, MRI, X-ray. You want to help me corral them?”

“Sure. If they act up, I’ll send them to Trauma.”

Angie laughed. “Hey, we want them to become doctors, not get scared off.”

“Trial by fire. But I’m not volunteering for a mammogram observation.”

“Hell, no. I have a few patient candidates for that.” Mohan followed her out to the waiting area, where the five very young-looking, nervous medical students had congregated in the middle of the floor, waiting for someone to come and tell them what to do. “Hey!” said Angie brightly. “I’m Angie Cartwright, MD. Hear you guys want to be radiology techs.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said one of the girls, eyes wide and startled.

“All right. You come on back and Dr. Mohan will show you where to

wait for observation opportunities."

A young man gave Mohan a startled look as the group passed her, filing into the hallway. "Did you get in a fight, Doc?" he asked.

"This job comes with risk hazards. Better you learn that now, before you're too deep into medical debt to crawl back out," said Mohan, and she was only partially joking. "Okay. Let's take you to the break room, get you some observational paperwork. You're doing this for class credits, right?"

Thirty minutes later, she was starting to explain what an CT scan did in the hallway outside the when Dr. Abbot rounded the corner and gave her a wave. "Hey, Mohan," he said, coming up to her. "You seen Cartwright around?"

"She's currently doing an ultrasound on our DVT from this morning. Pretty backed up."

He winced. "Shoot. Where's the tech who's supposed to come in at 6:30?"

"Not here yet, apparently." Mohan turned to the group, never failing to turn down a teaching moment. "This is Dr. Abbot, one of our emergency medicine specialists from the ER. When shit goes down, they send it up here. Dr. Abbot, what are you looking for?"

He put his hands on his hips and surveyed the five students. "Higher staff numbers," he said dryly, which got a light giggle from one of them. "I'm up here searching for the results of a chest X-ray that was supposed to have been done by six AM on a patient who came into the ER with what I suspect is a broken rib."

"Oh, that's not good," said Brayden, one of the students. "Uh, because the patient could possibly puncture a lung while you wait. Causing, um. Further medical issues."

"Exactly." Abbot turned to her. "Is Angie seriously alone up here?"

"My other tech went out for a smoke break thirty minutes ago and hasn't been seen since," said Angie, coming around the corner with Pam McCall. "You can go right back out to the waiting room and sit down, ma'am, and every five minutes get up and walk— yeah, I'm backlogged, I'm sorry, Dr. Abbot. Um, I'll call security and ask them to look out for Jason, and in the meantime you're welcome to look for

the results— I know I did that X-ray on your chest trauma patient, it's definitely in the system." She gestured at the CT room vaguely. "Mohan, you want to show them the MRI? I got a patient coming in for a scan in, like, ten minutes."

Well, her patients in the ER were being handled, so she had nothing better to do. "Sure. Okay, kids, let's walk." She escorted them into the reception room as Abbot peeled off and headed for the computer, then walked the kids through the patient dressing room and into the control room and finally to the actual machine. "This is a magnetic resonance imaging system," she said, waving her arm at the large white tube in the middle of the room. "Can anyone tell me how it's different from a CT scan or an X-ray?"

"Oh!" exclaimed one of the boys— Brayden again, who was doing about ninety percent of the question answering. "It uses non-ionizing radiation to image, which is safer."

"Correct. Any time anyone besides Brayden here wants to jump in, be my guest. I don't bite." She stepped back and gestured at the control room desk. The kids crowded around. "This is where the machine is operated, similar to an X-ray. The walls are a Faraday cage to stop the magnetic fields from extending outside to the rest of the hospital. The operating tech sits here after ensuring the doors are fully closed and all metal is removed from the room before engaging the system, and that is the most important thing you have to remember when operating an MRI. If there is metal inside the patient's body in that room, like a pacemaker or a knee replacement, and that thing turns on, you are, to use the medical parlance, absolutely screwed. You will open yourself to massive liability, you will probably be the subject of a malpractice suit, and depending on the circumstances, you could never work in medicine again. Always, always check. Got that?"

A few of the kids looked pale, but Brayden inched closer. "But there's, like, an emergency shut off or something, right?"

"Glad you asked. There are usually two kinds of emergency shutoff buttons in an MRI control room." Mohan indicated the desk with its two large red buttons. "The emergency shutdown is for electrical power and does not do anything to the magnet. The QUENCH button, right there under that glass box? That cuts off the magnet's power, but not the electricity. It neutralizes the magnetic field by dumping all the helium out of the coils that create the magnetic field. It is incredibly, incredibly expensive to run a quench. It will put the MRI out of commission for weeks and cost thousands of dollars to replace the

helium. Angie can tell you more about the protocol covering when to use both of these options when she has a second, but generally you want to wait for the systems engineer to give you the all-clear."

"Do the systems have, like a failsafe? Like you can't start the MRI unless everything is good to go?" asked a nervous-looking young woman— Mohan was pretty sure her name was Raya.

"No. Manual checking only. Mistakes happen, but there comes a certain point at which trusting machines and programs don't quite fill in the gap for error. Oh, hi, Dr. Abbot." He'd just come in through the dressing room, plastic transparent X-ray in hand. "Did you find your X-rays?"

"I did. I was trying to find Angie again, get a second opinion on the results." He glanced over at the door again, but Brayden, ever-eager, stepped up.

"I can look at it, sir," he said. "I mean, I know how to read an X-ray."

"Appreciate it, but I really need the expert," said Abbot, looking over at him with a tired little smile.

"No, like, Brayden's really good. He caught a hairline fracture on a sternum during one of our practical exams that not even the radiology tech could see," said Raya, and Brayden, eager to prove himself, reached down in what was probably an automatic movement to wipe off the glowing computer screen so that Abbot could hold the X-ray up against it.

Except it was a touchscreen.

And the program for starting the MRI was open below the screensaver because Angie had been running from station to station by herself for half an hour and probably leaving programs open to save time, and when Brayden tapped the screen, it happened to be directly over the button that started the program.

Double-tap. Accident. Override the one failsafe, which was that the button could not be tapped just once, but had to be tapped twice, purposefully.

And the MRI hummed to life.

Several things happened at once. Dr. Abbot's right leg jerked backward, thrusting him forward and down with a shout of pain as

every metal item in the control room shot toward the walls, the open door, the machine. The students screamed. An iPhone, then another and another, tumbled out of someone's pocket and smashed against the door, glass falling straight down as the metal of it hurtled to the siren call of the MRI along with its fellow phones and a mess of objects from the control desk. The lockers in the changing room crashed down, yanked to the walls with a slam. A screech of metal alerted her to the fact that the computer and the monitor and the mouse and the keyboard were flying off the desk just before they all smashed into the wall and pinned themselves there, the mouse sailing through the door and striking her in the shoulder on its way to the MRI.

But she barely noticed. Because Abbot was skidding toward the open door, and Mohan felt her bobby pins rip out of her hair and fly away as she dived for Abbot, who was being yanked backward as if some invisible hand had snatched at his leg, and she had no time to think about what she was going to do as she rolled and covered him with her body just as he was skidding through the doorway, gripping the threshold of the door with her hands to stop him. It was too strong. Her hands slipped, so she grabbed him instead: he was tugged back and she tried to wrench him back down but to no avail as her fingers clutched at his clothing and his arms locked around her like iron and her feet sought purchase against the smooth, slippery floor. Nothing worked. She was going to be yanked backward with Abbot and crushed against the MRI tube because there was no way she was going to ever let go of him, not a chance in hell. "Quench!" she screamed over the whirring and the screaming. "Fucking now, *now, QUENCH QUENCH QUENCH—"*

The whirring died. The metallic clatter of items crashing to the ground replaced it. Mohan gasped, shaking, and relaxed with relief against Abbot, who was underneath her, chest to chest, panting with his arms locked around her waist. "Okay," she gasped. "Okay, okay, we're all okay. Raya, take your friends out to the lobby right now and tell Cartwright we had to perform a quench on the MRI. Right now. Go."

"Yes, ma'am," said Raya, shaking, and led the other four out. Brayden hesitated in the doorway, tears in his eyes like he was going to say something, but thought better of it didn't say a word, and left.

Mohan peeled herself up off of Abbot as his arms loosened themselves from her waist. She sat up on her knees and took frantic inventory: he didn't seem hurt, but internal injuries could be hard to catch. "Are you hurt?" she asked, checking his pulse automatically. Pulse strong.

Really strong. Respiration good. "Abbot, are you okay?"

“Just my pride,” he said softly, staring up into her face. “Let me sit up, would you?”

“Yeah, yeah. Sure.” She sat back, rolled off him as he pushed himself up to a sitting position and it was only then that she noticed his right leg— well, foot— was gone, an empty brown pant leg flat against the floor, and she automatically looked for blood (had his whole fucking foot been torn off somehow?) but found none, then at the MRI machine, which had released a rain of mangled metal items. Pens. Bobby pins. An organizer. All the student’s phones, cracked and ruined. Loose cables.

And a prosthetic leg wearing a sneaker that matched the one on Abbot’s left foot.

Oh, my God. Oh. Oh. Oh. She brought her hands up to press against her forehead for a moment. How had she forgotten all about this? How? How could something that important have slipped her mind? “I thought for a second you had a— pins in your foot or ankle or a, a knee replacement or something,” she said feebly. “I forgot. I—”

“Well, uh.” He sniffed and rubbed his nose. “I stopped sliding when it got ripped off my leg. Took a second, though. If I *had* had pins in my leg, you wouldn’t have been able to stop me getting pinned to the machine, uh, and then the pins would have… exited my body by force. Probably would have been pretty messy.”

“I— shit,” said Mohan, getting up and going for his leg because she couldn't think of anything else to do. “It’s all bent up. I thought most prosthetics were made of, um, carbon fiber or aluminum or things that don’t, you know, affect— things that aren’t affected by magnets.”

He reached out his hand and took his leg back from her, examining it. “It’s a titanium pylon, but the screws that hold the pylon to the carbon fiber socket here on the bottom of it are stainless steel. Which means...” He rolled his pant leg back, exposing the black gel liner that capped the end of his leg and protected his skin from the socket. It was shredded along the bottom and partially up the side. “Rotated pretty hard and pinched. Screws got yanked through both the socket and my little sock here.”

Mohan winced in sympathy. “Are you bleeding?”

“Ah, don't worry about it. I’m fine,” he said tightly, and slipped the

socket back over the liner, but it didn't fit correctly: even Mohan could see that. A warped gap, a crack in the carbon fiber. "Fine," he said again, like he was trying to convince himself. "Yeah. Okay. Give me a hand up?"

"Dr. Abbot, I really have to warn against putting your body weight on a damaged—"

He lifted his head and looked up at her from the floor, and his eyes were damp, his voice low and hoarse. "Will you just help me up, Mohan. Please."

"Okay," she whispered, and reached down, bracing herself against the wall to haul his body weight up to stand. He swayed on his leg, tested the weight, and his eye twitched.

"Okay," he said quietly. "All right. What time is it?"

"Um—" She patted her pockets, remembered she'd left her phone downstairs in her locker, and made a guess. "Couple minutes past seven, I think. Seven fifteen?"

"Forty-five minutes," Abbot said, and took a step on his right foot. His eye twitched again, just the muscle below his eyelid, moving like something was trying to break out of there. "Yeah. I got this. It's fine."

There was no way in hell Abbot was going to walk around on a broken prosthetic for forty-five minutes. There was no way in hell she'd let him. "You leave at eight, you said? Dr. Collins can handle the ER for forty-five minutes until Dr. Robby comes back in."

"I'm not leaving my patients." He took another step, paused, swayed, took another. From the set of his shoulders and the gravelly rasp of his voice, she could tell he was in pain. Probably a lot of pain.

"You have to fill out an incident report," Mohan tried, coming around to his side and closing the door to the dressing room. "Workplace injury."

"I'm not injured."

"Dr. Abbot," she said quietly, back to the door. "You made me come up here and waste my own time, way further away from the end of my shift, getting X-rays. This isn't any different."

"It's different," he responded, voice low and hoarse and quiet. "Please

move."

"How is it different? If we have a last minute emergency in the last ten minutes before your shift ends and you can't— look, I got hurt, you got hurt. Same thing. I don't get— I didn't want preferential treatment because someone threw a right hook at me, I—"

"It's not the same because you didn't—" He cut himself off, mouth working, eyes everywhere but at her face. "You didn't humiliate yourself."

She laughed, incredulous. "I got punched and went down like a Fourth of July folding chair, Abbot. In front of half the ER and the cops—"

"Yeah, well, not in front of a bunch of kids and not in front of a—" And he sharply cut himself off again, breathing steadily from his nose, eyes closed. "Please," he repeated. "Move."

"Seriously? What? In front of a what?"

A short, dry laugh worked its way out of his throat. "No. Absolutely not. I'm not playing that game."

"It's not a game." She moved to block the door as he tried to reach for the handle: was he trying to backhandedly insult her now? This was just hurtful, and so unlike him. "You didn't humiliate yourself in front of a, a what, a 3R who fucked up a delicate patient dynamic because she thought she could handle something she wasn't informed on? You can say it, okay? You can say whatever you want about me. I get it, okay? You're hurting. And I'd rather you take it out on me and not the rest of the ER. Just go home. I know it was embarrassing, but at least you're not dead."

His eyes flashed up, found hers, searched her face for a second like he was trying to read her. "You didn't—" His mouth was still working, like he couldn't find the right words to form the answer to the question *in front of what?* "In front of someone you think very highly of," he finally said. "A coworker you like very much. And respect. And want to— want to impress."

Her brain screeched to a halt in the middle of her train of thought. He was inches from her face. So close. Her back was to the door and her hair was loose in her eyes because her bobby pins had been mangled in the MRI and Dr. Abbot was saying— was saying he wanted to impress her. That he liked and respected her, that—

“Yes, I did,” she said softly, her heart pounding. “Yes, I did. You were right there, Abbot.”

Dr. Abbot remained where he was for what felt like a whole eternity, staring at her like he’d never actually seen her before, like he was here, with her, present and whole and drinking in her face. His lips parted: he was about to say something or lean in or— or *something,* and Mohan tilted her chin up— he had only three inches on her but sometimes he just felt so— so— “Samira,” he breathed, and goosebumps rose down her arms and then a knock on the door jolted her forward into him. She brought her hands up, startled and embarrassed, and he stepped away, also startled, bumping into her, and they had just awkwardly disentangled themselves when Angie opened the door with a look on her face like she’d seen a ghost.

“Oh, my God,” she said, staring at the carnage of the MRI. “Fuck me. I’ll have to report this to Gloria and we’ll have to send our MRI’s to Mercy until the helium gets replaced. God *damn* it. That Brayden kid said he accidentally turned on the damn machine? How the fuck did that happen?”

“String of human error,” said Mohan swiftly, because Abbot looked like he was in pain and she really didn’t need him talking right now. “Operating program was still open under the screensaver and I don’t think Brayden realized it was a touchscreen. He tapped it to try to help look at the X-ray that Dr. Abbot had finally found.”

Angie went a little gray. “Oh, God, I left it running,” she said thinly. “Shit.”

“You’re overworked,” said Abbot, coming back to life. “Did you ever find Jason?”

“Yeah, security found him asleep against the back loading bay wall. Sleep deprivation. And the higher-ups finally called my other tech, who just overslept and is on the way.” She ran a hand through her short-cropped hair.

“I’ll put in a word for you with Gloria. Don’t worry about it, okay?” Abbot put a reassuring hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “You have a good rest of your shift.”

“Thanks, Doc,” she mumbled as they left.

“Shit,” said Abbot almost instantly, turning back. “Ah, X-ray opinion. Angie, can you—”

“It’s a compound rib fracture,” she said immediately, already on her way out of the control room with his X-ray in her hand. “Here, see, on the fifth, and here. Hard to see from the front, but the side view will show it.”

“Thank you,” said Abbot, and headed back off to the elevators, Mohan tailing him. He wasn't walking quite right, and his face was set and hard, tense as a spring. The doors opened, they entered, the doors shut. Once inside, he leaned back, taking weight off his prosthetic and resting his head against the wall. “Why are you still here, huh?” he asked wearily as the elevator began its descent into the Pitt.

She glared at him. “Because I’m worried about you. Why are *you* still here?”

The ghost of a smile crossed his face. “Maybe because I’m worried about you.”

Why did the elevator suddenly feel so small? “Huh. Well, we’re really in a conundrum, aren't we? You won’t leave because I’m here, and I won’t leave because you’re here.”

“Mm-hmm. What’s your recommendation to solve the issue, Dr. Mohan?” he asked, shifting his weight back and looking straight ahead.

She smiled and turned her face to the doors. Abbot really was just as stubborn as she was. “We both leave at the same time. I can give you a lift home. You’re right-handed, which means you’re right-footed when you drive, and putting pressure on your broken socket in order to use the gas and brake pedal is going to be pretty painful.”

“Maybe I have a manual transmission.”

“That’s even worse. In Pittsburgh traffic? A *manual?* Only if you have a thing for punishment.”

Abbot sighed and reached up, rubbing the back of his weathered neck. “All right, all right. I’ll accept a ride, but that's it. Let me grab my shit and tell Collins.”

“Great.” Mohan strode out as the doors opened, making for the lockers, and didn’t look back: best to not push it. “Perlah?” she called, but Perlah had already gone home and Princess was there instead, glancing up from the Hub. “Hey, Princess. I’m going home a little early, Dr. Abbot’s orders.”

“I heard!” Princess leaned forward, the light of good gossip in her eye. “Is it true you got punched out by a fireman?”

“Oh, my God, no. Stop playing telephone with everybody, huh?” Mohan rolled her eyes and headed to turn in her scrubs: she still had blood on the hems of her pants and probably should have changed them out a while ago, but between needing an X-ray and the drama in the MRI room... Getting her clean clothes out of her locker, she shook them out and stripped out of her dirty scrubs, fiddling with the screen as she stood there in her tank top and bike shorts. *Come on, jeez.* Finally, the screen flashed that it had accepted the scrubs, and she bent to tug her sweats on over her shorts, but caught a flash of black from the corner of her eye and of course Abbot had walked in here while she was changing. At least she wasn’t in her underwear. “Hey,” she said, standing up and shrugging on her hoodie. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah, just a second.” He was messing with the other scrub machine, and when it finally flashed for him he stripped off his black top, leaving him in a white T-shirt and his brown pants. She had to turn her back for a moment and pretend to mess with her backpack, finding her keys. The T-shirt was just a hair too tight, his freckled biceps snug against the fabric. *Get a fucking grip. He’s like fifteen years older than you, probably, and he’s also your attending, and— and—*

And she liked him. And he liked her. He’d said as much. And— well...

“All right. You hungry?” He limped a little as he walked over to join her on the way out of the building, into the cool early morning parking garage. Out of the white jewelbox. Into the color and light of reality, the real world, where he wasn’t her attending and she wasn’t an R3: they were just people. “I usually stop somewhere on my way home. Little routine.”

“Sure, I could eat. What do you want?”

“Ah, you pick. My treat.” She unlocked her car as they came to it— a 2003 Ford Taurus, slightly sun-damaged but in otherwise great condition. Dark green. “Nice ride,” he said, smiling as he slid himself heavily into the passenger side. “Oof.”

“No ragging on my car,” she warned, buckling in. “It was my dad’s.”

“Not in a million years. Good taste.” He patted the dashboard affectionately as she pulled out and picked her way through the garage, then leaned back and exhaled deeply. “Maybe we get drive-thru at wherever instead of stopping, Mohan?”

“Yeah, I bet you can’t wait to get home,” she said, glancing at her rearview mirror as she pulled out into the street.

A dry chuckle escaped his throat. “Well, that and, uh, I really don’t want to bleed all over your dad’s car.”

“What?” She glanced over and saw what the brown fabric of his pants had hidden: a dark stain seeping from about five inches below his knee. “Oh, shit,” she said, jerking her eyes back through the windshield. “You didn’t say you were bleeding! Abbot! I could have grabbed a trauma kit!”

“I have plenty of stuff at home. It’s not that serious, I promise. Just drive, okay? I live in Summer Hill.” He leaned his head back against the headrest, breathing deeply. In through his nose. Out through his mouth. “But I could really use a sandwich,” he added, eyes shut.

“You and me both,” she said, shaking her head. “First aid first, though. Did the screw break skin or something?”

“Or something,” he said thinly. “It’ll be fine. I promise. I can take care of myself.”

“I’m not gonna drive my bleeding attending home and just dump him like a— a drive-by shooting victim at his front door, Abbot.”

“The house isn’t exactly set up, uh, for visitors,” he said, his jaw flexing below the skin of his cheek. "Seriously, just drop me off. I'll survive."

“You know, when I was doing house calls in East Liberty as part of my social work classes on bias in medicine, we went to this one lady’s house, right? She was a total professional. Elegant. So polite, so well dressed, used to be in data input. And her house was totally hoarded out. Roaches, cat shit, floors rotting through, boxes and trash to the ceiling. She’d lost her mom twenty years ago and it fucked her up. Like you said. We don’t have control over how our brains decide to handle anything. Whatever your house looks like, I can handle it.” She waited a beat as she merged onto the 279. “But it’s not cat shit and rats, though, right?” she asked, shooting him a side-eye.

“No,” he said, the ghost of a laugh haunting his voice. “No, Mohan, it’s not cat shit and rats.”

“Okay. See? Good. Even if it was, I’d handle it.”

“One thing nobody could ever accuse you of is not being able to handle something,” Abbot told her, closing his eyes against the morning sunshine. “That is a fact, Dr. Mohan. That's a fact.”

HOUR FOURTEEN

8:00-9:00

Mohan pulled in and parked her Taurus in the driveway of a small house with a medium-sized yard. Abbot's home was on a hill, a basement and garage jutting out on the left and the rest of the red brick rising above. It was slightly battered, but clean. Leaves blew across the yard as she crossed over to the passenger side and opened the door for him. Most of this part of the neighborhood consisted of houses from the 1920s, craftsman style with porches. Fences in some yards, older cars like hers parked in the driveways and on the streets. A mailbox in front of every house, little red flag up. Americana, she thought, turning off the engine and getting out of the driver's seat. That's what this was called: Americana. A little run-down, but well kept.

Abbot swung his legs out, gingerly stepping down on his right as his jaw knotted and he hauled himself up, then leaned swiftly to his left. "Son of a *bitch,"* he said hoarsely, clutching his bag and swaying.

"I got your bag. Give it here." She took it, slung it over her shoulder, and shut the car door behind him as he tried to find a way to stand that didn't dig the warped screws into his leg, presumably. There were about five steps up to the porch. "You go in through the garage, or the front door?"

"Shit," he forced out, sweat breaking out on his forehead. "Yeah, uh, I'll make it up the steps. I got it. Usually I open the garage door, but, you know— the remote's in my car, and my car's at the hospital."

"You need a hand, just yell," Mohan told him as she locked the Taurus.

"I *got* it. Christ, Mohan," he snapped, and she told herself to not take it personally like she had a million times with a million patients on a thousand rotations. People in pain didn't respond perfectly, and embarrassed people responded even worse. So she just slowly tailed him up the steps as he limped up them, hand over hand on the rail, most of his weight on his left. "Key's under the fake dog shit," he told her, leaning on the door with one hand.

"Fake *what?"* she said, her jaw dropping. That got a faint grin to crack across his exhausted, pain-lined face.

“Dog shit. Right there.” He pointed at a suspiciously realistic brown pile on the front porch. “Great trick, right? Nobody’s stolen my keys for the eight years I’ve lived here.”

“That’s absolutely disgusting,” she informed him, rolling her eyes as she squatted and gingerly touched the thing. It was indeed brown plastic, and she turned it over, shaking the key inside out into her palm. “But also kind of genius, I hate to admit.”

He waited as she unlocked the door, breathing evenly, and then she had it open and was letting him in and slipping in behind him and shutting the door. “Lock it,” he said hoarsely, staggering off into the living room. She did, and turned around.

She didn’t really know what she’d been expecting. Maybe a veteran’s den— windows with tinfoil, guns, ammo, army crap all over the place. Or a really awful bachelor pad, with a mattress on the floor and garbage everywhere and a TV set on apple boxes. But this seemed like a totally normal house. Lived-in, with empty takeout cartons on the kitchen counter, sure, and a beat-up old suede sofa and cheap furniture, but it was fine. Even the police scanner neatly set on the desk by the window next to a laptop and a printer was in good condition, although the electronics cords and plugs were all over the place by the baseboards in a tangle like a snake’s nest. She shook herself back to the present: she’d come in here for a reason, and that reason was to help the man who was currently sprawled out on the sofa in a white T-shirt stained with sweat and brown pants and one sock and one sneakered prosthetic leg, breathing heavily, head back. “Where’s your first aid kit? Trauma kit, whatever you’ve got?”

He swallowed. She saw his throat move before he sat up, eyes half shut. “Minor trauma kit is under the kitchen sink, blue box. Major trauma kit is in the red box. There are two more of each in the hall closet, the hall bathroom, and my bathroom.”

Oh. Okay. Maybe slightly not quite a normal house. That was fine. Mohan moved off to the kitchen and bent down, opening the cabinet below the sink. Nestled by cans of pest spray and cleaning supplies, she found the kits, and pulled out both just in case. “Pain on a scale of one to ten?” she called out, standing up and heading back into the living room.

“What, are you gonna do my chart, Dr. Mohan?” he said sardonically, eyes shut as she sat down on the coffee table and put the kits aside.

“One to ten, sir. How bad?”

“Mmm. Let’s say a three,” he muttered. She bent down to lift his ankle, and he jerked away, startled. *“Hey,* don’t—”

“I’m just lifting it up to get pressure off it,” she said softly. “That’s all. Okay?”

Abbot looked at her for a long, long moment, and she caught the glitter of moisture in his eyes before he swallowed and turned his face away, sniffing hard. “God. Uh, yeah. Sure.”

“Okay.” She lifted his leg, her fingers curling around the hard, immovable metal under his right pant leg, and pushed the hem of it up past his knee, slipping her fingers into the gap between the warped socket and the hot, damp sleeve over his skin and popping off the leg easily.

“Dammit,” he said suddenly, passing his hand over his eye. “Mohan, stop. I got this. Just— I don’t want you to do this.”

“You might not be able to see the extent of any injuries from your angle of sight.”

“You think I don’t know that?” he snapped, reaching down and peeling off the gel sleeve that covered what was left of his lower leg like a sock. A hiss escaped his teeth, and Mohan took in the sight of his bare skin, blinking. Several deep, already bruised furrows, bleeding— a lot of blood, actually, smeared all over his skin and imprinted in the shape of the knit of the sleeve. It had puddled in the bottom of the socket, soaking his skin.

“A *three?”* she asked in disbelief, making eye contact with him for a brief second. “Seriously?”

“Shit,” he said, reaching down and trying to feel out the extent of the damage. The muscle under his eyes twitched frantically, his mouth a tight line below his sharp, weathered cheekbones.

“Oh, God, no, you didn’t wash your hands! Stop that.” She smacked at his fingers without even thinking and slipped on a pair of nitrile gloves he had in his kit. “I’ll do it. Okay? Just let me help you.”

“Great bedside manner, Dr. Mohan,” he managed, leaning back as she lifted his leg and examined him. “High patient satisfaction rates, huh? Everyone must love being snapped at.”

“No, you just get the special treatment,” she informed him, testing the depth of the deepest cut. It didn’t look too bad: just bloody. “I’m gonna disinfect this and clean you up. Sorry in advance.”

“Ah, fuck it,” said Abbot in a strained voice, and then he didn’t make a sound as she wiped the end of his shin with alcohol wipes, cleaning out the scrapes and abrasions and the two shallow lacerations that were the source of most of the blood. She tucked her hand under his knee to lift the end of his leg higher for full visibility and set to work smearing him with antibiotic cream next. Parts of the abrasions were located in old scar tissue, hard and nerveless and pitted in a few places, and she had to work to get the cream in there one-handed, but she made it happen. “You know,” he said faintly, and she glanced down. He’d gone slightly bloodless, every freckle standing out in sharp contrast, his neck creased as he stared up at her from his position. “Uh, you know, Mohan, this isn’t the worst position I’ve ever been caught in.”

She blinked and assessed: he was on his back, slouched down almost flat, right leg in the air held up and his foot planted on the floor. “Hilarious,” she said, shaking her head with a smile. “Here.” Sliding down off the coffee table allowed him to sit up more and lift his leg less, and she still had access to the injuries from a kneeling position on the carpet of the living room. “Better?”

Abbot sucked air in through his teeth. “No comment,” he said, slightly strained, and Mohan paused in the middle of pressing a sterile gauze pad to his leg to re-assess. Oh. She was kneeling between his legs, on the floor. That— it was— well, it—

“Are you still— do you want food? I can Doordash us something.”

“Starving,” he admitted. “Last thing I ate was a protein bar at midnight. Uh, there’s a place I like, does all-day dinner. Steve’s Smashburgers.”

“Let’s hear the order, Doc,” she said, finishing taping up his leg.

“Double stack, cheese, pickles, special sauce. Side of curly fries.” His stomach growled, and Mohan had to smile. “See?” he said, rolling his head to the side. “Starving.”

“Well, the good news is that you’re all patched up, don’t need any serious work. Bad news is I wouldn’t recommend trying to put weight on that until the bruising heals up at least.” She got up and stripped off the gloves, going for her phone and finding the restaurant he

liked.

“Be straight with me, Doc. Am I gonna lose the leg?” he asked, completely deadpan as he stared at her from the couch, and when her tired brain caught up with the joke she almost dropped her phone, laughing.

“Oh, my God,” she choked, wiping her eyes as he fought a wry little smile. “I was seriously still in ER mode. Jesus, Abbot. I almost said no.”

“Almost said no,” he repeated, chuckling. “Ah, God. Do me another favor, would you? Bedroom closet, I got a pelican case— that’s a kind of hard shell military case. Just lug it out here for me.”

“Okay,” she told him, pressing *order* on their food before she went down the hall. Finding his bedroom was hard— the first door was set up as a home gym, and the second was kind of a study or office: desk, books, walls covered in memorabilia. She didn’t have time to snoop, and it wasn’t her business, but there were an awful lot of photos of groups of men in uniform, and plaques, and big framed pieces with patches inside. *Later, maybe,* she thought, shutting the door and going for the third, which was the bathroom. At last, she found the door to his room, and opened it.

It was dark. Entirely dark, and cool, and it smelled like sleep and unwashed hair. She flipped a light on. Tinfoil blacked out the windows, and the bed was unmade, rumpled like he had gotten up last night or maybe several nights in a row without bothering to make it. Laundry overflowed from several baskets piled by the dresser under the windows, and a vacuum cleaner stood unplugged in the corner. Mohan looked around, found the closet, opened it, and pulled out the case he’d been talking about. It was a little beat up around the edges, and lighter than she’d expected. She took it back down the hall to the living room, where Abbot was dozing off on the couch, but jerked back to wakefulness when she set it on the coffee table.

“Thank you,” he told her, and leaned forward, flipping the latches. Inside was a bed of molded foam, and on it another prosthetic leg, this one slightly different than the damaged one. Clunkier, a little heavier-looking. More black straps, less ergonomic. “Backup leg,” he said, lifting it up and turning it from side to side. “Works okay in a pinch until my prosthetist can get me a replacement.”

The thought of him jamming that thing on over his injured leg and

forcing his weight on it made her wince. “Wait, what? Not if you’re injured. You have to let yourself heal, Abbot.”

He shot her a dark look. “I’m not gonna boot-scoot or hop or crawl around my house for a week, Mohan, what do you— I need to get around, all right? I need to do shit, I need to work.”

Pointing at her swollen mouth, she gave him the look she usually reserved for her most stubborn patients. “You’ve had an injury on the job exactly like me. We do get paid time off for that, in case you forgot.”

Abbot scoffed. “Paid ti— what am I gonna do with paid time off? My job is helping people. I’m a goddamn physician. I got that whole department counting on me for night shifts, I’m not gonna sit around my house for a week doing nothing.” Something hardened in his face, tightened his jaw. “You should go.”

“What?”

“You— Mohan, you’re already blurring the lines here between work and home life, and that’s not a good thing if you want to keep your mental health in something resembling a shape.”

She let out an incredulous scoff. “Says the guy who keeps a police scanner in his living room, a go-bag in the hall closet, and eight trauma kits stashed around the house.” The muscle under Abbot’s left eye twitched as his jaw rippled. Maybe she’d gone a little too far. “I’m sorry,” she added on, wiping her loose hair out of her face. “I shouldn’t have said that. I— look, you’re exhausted, I’m exhausted, we just got off a fourteen hour shift where we both got injured and had to see some— some fucked up shit. As much as I’d like to, you know, say that I don’t bring work home, or as much as you tell me I shouldn’t bring work home, you and I both know that’s pretty impossible with a job like this.”

Dr. Abbot exhaled long and deep, rolling his head back onto the couch. “I gotta go to work,” he murmured, eyes shut.

“You gotta elevate your leg so the bleeding stops,” she said, glancing at the red stains already seeping through the gauze pad on the bottom of his leg. “And your— sock, here? Does this go in the washing machine, or is it still usable?” She picked up his discarded, blood-soaked black gel liner, turning it over in her hands to try to pick out the damage, the rips. It stained her fingers red.

“I have a bunch of those in my dresser drawers. Just toss it.”

“Okay. Sorry for all the questions, I’m not— O and P were not exactly a major point of study, like, at any point in my career.” She tossed the old sock into the garbage can and washed her hands.

He shifted himself down to the right and elevated his leg, a pillow under his knee, right leg bent, foot resting flat as he lay on the couch. “I still can’t believe you forgot I had a prosthetic,” he said lightly.

“Look, in my defense, that was after the first shift from hell, and I don’t remember, like, anything that happened after about four AM.” Mohan sat down on his couch by his foot, sinking into well-worn suede, and sighed deeply, leaning her head back.

“Really? Beers in the park? Nothing? Wow.” He lifted his head to look down at her. “See, that’s the post-traumatic stress. Something happens that your brain decides is a life or death situation. You have a massive adrenaline kick while it’s all happening, and then when it’s bleeding out of you on the comedown, your brain throws out anything that’s not completely vital. The amount of car crash patients we have who don’t even remember coming to the ER when they submit requests for their medical records for insurance… the brain’s a weird thing, Mohan.”

“Yeah,” she said, shooting him a look out of the side of her eyes. “It can even make you convinced you have to hurt yourself in order to seek external validation when the most logical course of action is rest.”

He snorted softly, shaking his head and leaning it back. “God,” he muttered, his cheeks stained pink. “Robby was right. You should have gone into psych.”

“I’m not trying to embarrass you. I hope you— I want you to know that.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t need you feeling sorry for me, either. Also, just so you know, if the MRI ever fires up again and someone’s really getting yanked due to internal metal elements, full-body tackling them is just about the worst thing you can do. You’ll just get yourself crushed, too. You can’t resist a magnetic field that strong. So don’t ever do that again.” Abbot pushed himself up on his elbows, looking right at her. “But I’m really, really grateful that you did,” he added.

She couldn’t look away. Dark eyes, intent, those sharp cheekbones and

weathered face. “Yeah,” she whispered, reaching down and laying a hand on his right ankle. “Me, too.”

Slowly, like he was afraid to startle her, he sat up, pushed on his hands until he was curled in on himself, about two feet from her face. She didn’t move her hand. She didn’t move. Not an inch. His eyes slid down to her mouth, slow and deliberate, then back up to her eyes. “Samira…” he whispered, rough and so, so tired, and then the doorbell rang and he jumped, then swung himself sideways with a guilty little laugh. “Ah, shit. Doordash. I’ll get it.”

“No, you put your leg up. I’ll get it,” she told him, heading for the door to collect the food. She barely paid attention to the delivery guy, tipping him quickly and shutting the door again. *What the fuck was that?* Two usages of her first name in one night? He must be going through something. Once she’d brought the bag back into the living room, she sat down and handed Abbot his burger and fries while she ate her own meal: tater tots smothered in cheese and green onions and chili. Surreptitiously, she watched him eat. Abbot sat up, faced front, and attacked that burger like it had personally wronged him, like he was afraid it would eat him before he ate it. He was already done and starting on the fries before she was even halfway through her chili tots, a deep, satisfied noise emerging from his chest like a bear in a cave. “You think you were just a little hungry?” she teased between forkfuls.

“Just a tiny bit,” he told her, gulping down his Coke. “Mm. Aw, shit, did you pay for this? You did, huh, it was on your phone. And I said it was on me, didn’t I?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Nah, that’s not fair. My favorite R3 comes home with me, patches my leg up, and buys me dinner?”

“We’ll call it even for you looking out for me today. And I’m your only R3.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, smiling a little as he finished his food and leaned back with a sigh. “All right. If my bleeding stopped, I gotta get a shower.”

“Here,” she said. “I’ll check.”

“Mohan, you really don’t have to—”

“Oh, that’s funny, I thought I was Samira a minute ago,” she said lightly, as if it meant nothing, while she slid down to the carpet again to get a good look at the bottom of his leg. The blood on the gauze pads was browning, and there was no fresh flow. “Good news. Looks like it stopped.”

“I probably got a plastic bag under the sink or something I can use for washing,” he said, but made no movement to get up, heavy-lidded eyes closed. “God, I’m tired. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. You want a hand?”

“No. I might just rot on the couch for the next week, tell you the truth. God, this really fucking hurts.” He lifted his bandaged leg and massaged the edge of the gauze where he could reach it, pain flitting across his face.

“So, not a three. I knew it.”

“I have a pretty high pain tolerance.”

That somehow didn’t really surprise her. “Mm.” She finished her food and put her trash with his in the empty bag. “Well, let me clean this up, and then I’ll—”

“Mohan,” he said quietly in a tone of voice that brought her attention hauling right back around in a circle as she stood with the Doordash garbage in her hands. “I’d really prefer it if you went home now. Please. I— I can handle this myself.”

Okay. Rejection. She tried to compartmentalize that: he was embarrassed and he’d said as much that he didn’t like that, especially not in front of her, but still. “Not your first rodeo with the MRI machine?” she asked, heading to the kitchen and stuffing the trash into the can. “You got a procedure for this, huh? Checklist on the fridge?”

A dry chuckle came from the couch. “No, actually, this is a first.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stick around, just in case you fall?”

Abbot gave her am exasperated look and swung himself down off the couch on one foot and two hands, laid himself out flat on the floor, then rolled himself easily to his side, pushed himself up with both hands, swung his foot out and around like a breakdancer, and parked

himself in a seated position on the carpet before using his right hand to brace himself against the floor, balanced his uneven weight on his foot, and pushed himself to a standing position, unfolding like a spring. “I’m pretty sure I can handle a fall,” he said smoothly, sweating a little as he stood balanced on one foot. “I’m a below-the-knee amputee, I’m not ninety.”

Something tickled her memory: *someone you want to impress,* he’d said, meaning her . “Okay, I stand corrected,” she said, hands up in surrender, and seriously, the way his delts and shoulders bulged under that shirt? She didn’t have to pretend much to be impressed. “Very cool. No boot-scooting here, I see.”

He shrugged as he sat back down on the sofa. “Well, hopping on one foot will put stress on the injuries, and it’s not exactly safe, because of the balance.”

“I’m not letting you put that old leg on,” she warned. “If I have to stay here all night and swat you off it, I will. Let that heal up.”

“Ah, you’re no fun,” he said lightly, but some of the defensiveness had gone out of his shoulders, the set of his head. “How about I swear I won’t put it on for eight hours. Scout’s honor.” He raised three fingers as Mohan circled back to get the first aid kits. “Promise. Cross my heart.”

“Fourteen,” she said from under the kitchen sink. “Give the bruising time to settle.”

“Ten.”

“Twelve, and that’s my final offer.”

“Twelve,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Twelve. God damn.”

She chuckled and stood up. “Come on. I’ll help you shower.”

“You’re off the clock. We both are. We—” He shook his head, moving his mouth like he couldn’t find the words to say, and he pulled a hand over his face. “I don’t need you helping me in the shower. I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. Just— get me to my room and we’ll call it good, okay?”

All right. She could live with that. He’d promised: twelve hours. Not

the brightest prospect for optimal healing, but better than eight. So Mohan came around back to the sofa and reached down, letting him drape his left arm around her shoulders and use her as a support. "Swing and plant," she offered, circling his waist with her right arm as they picked their way toward the hall. He sucked in a breath, squeezed her shoulders, and swung from the hip, foot planted on the floor a foot in front. "Good. See, you're a pro."

"You're stronger than you look, huh?" he asked, gripping her hard and close as they inched down the hallway.

"Ah, kind of have to be." He was crushed right up against her. Disinfectant, stale deodorant, unwashed scalp and hair. Warm and close and solid. Swing and plant, weight and release. Maybe she should talk about something. Something that made him feel better about himself. It couldn't be too fun, having to rely on another person just to walk to the bathroom. "Thanks for showing me that vertical mattress stitch today, by the way. I can't believe you could actually do it without looking."

"Practice with the foam blocks when you get a chance," he told her, leaning heavily on her. "You'll be able to do it better than me one day."

"Doubt that." Her face was pounding with every movement, and she realized in all the commotion she'd never iced it. "Can we— sorry, I just need a second."

"Yeah, of course." He peeled off her, leaning against the hallway wall, and she lifted her head, breathing deep as she tried to get her heart rate down and stop the pulsing in her nose and lip. "You good?"

She rolled her head to the side, trying to smile. It hurt, tugged at her lip. "Whew. Yeah, just— realized I forgot to put a cold compress on my face. And I never took any pain meds."

"Shit, Mohan," he said wearily. "Look at the pair of us. No pain meds, trying to help each other, walking disasters. Damn. You know what, I should have remembered that. That's on me. I should have made you go down and get a prescription for—"

"Oh, stop that," she said, laying a hand on his chest and shaking her head. "No, stop. Hey. It's my fault. I have to take care of myself, too. You know? I can't put that on you."

"I gotta look out for my people," he murmured, and then she realized

she had her hand on his chest, that his chest was warm and firm and solid and radiating heat, just radiating it and he reached up to touch her hand— no doubt to move it off him and remind her about professional behavior— but he didn't do that. Instead, he covered her hand with his. Light. Careful, like he was afraid to come on too strong. "Hey. I gotta watch out for everyone on the night shift. Right? That's my job. That's what I do. Not just patients, but all of you."

"Right," she mumbled, her face aching even worse and yes, it was probably because her pulse was rocketing up because was Abbot actually holding her hand over his heart right now?

"You put that on me, all right? You— you let me carry that." His thumb slid over the back of her hand, past the knuckles. Soft. Cautious. "Okay?"

She tilted her head up, close to his. So close. If she closed a space of three inches, she'd be— she'd— "Only if you let me carry a couple of things, too," she whispered. "Even if you're embarrassed about them. Deal?"

Abbot didn't move for a long moment, hovering inches from her face, and his breath smelled like the food he'd eaten not even fifteen minutes ago and he looked so, so tired and he kind of stunk like BO and dried sweat but so did she, so she didn't give a shit, not a single shit. "All right, deal," he whispered, and his hand was still over hers, the one on his chest and she could feel his pulse, rapid and heavy, *thud-thud-thud-thud* deep inside him where his heart was reacting to an adrenaline dump due either to the pain he was in or maybe, possibly, something else as his face dipped lower, his nose grazed hers so delicately that it didn't even hurt.

"Thank you," she told him, searching his eyes as best she could with her nose an inch from his and even though she was probably a little cross-eyed he didn't seem to give a fuck, so she leaned in and up a little, testing the waters, and that was when he brushed her mouth softly against his lips. It wasn't exactly a kiss, couldn't be called a kiss, because he was probably trying to avoid dislodging the butterfly bandage holding two halves of her broken skin together, but it still sent a coiling wave of something heavy and warm down her body and into her gut. He must have felt it, too, because his heart pounded hard in quick succession under her hand: *bam-bam-bam* as he dragged in a shaky little breath and turned his head away for a moment. "Sorry," she said immediately, shaken back to earth. "I—"

“Why are you apologizing when I’m the one who did it?” he asked roughly, turning his head back.

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “Should I do something I need to apologize for? Call it even?”

“Jesus,” he rasped, turning his face back to hers, “Jesus, Samira—” and she slid her hand up his chest, over the hard line of his collarbone and over his shirt and the hard tiny metal nubs of the chain he wore under it up to the rough skin on his neck as she pressed her open mouth to his. No pursing her lips: she’d break the knitting wound, but he eagerly took it in stride and let his parted mouth rest over hers, touching, breathing in from the sides like he was trying to breathe the air right from her lungs as he nestled his nose on her less-bruised cheek and brought his free hand up to cup her jaw. His stubble poked her chin, her lip, her cheek. Then he shifted his weight, rolled so that she was up against the wall, but he never let his mouth leave hers, caging it, chasing it, open against her parted lips. “Fuck,” he gasped against her mouth. *“Fuuuuuck.”*

“It’s okay,” she whispered, trying to look at him and keep her hands on him and keep him here, with her, against the wall. “It’s okay, it’s okay. Hey.”

“I can’t do this,” he murmured, still pushing up against her body, no sign of disengaging at all. “I can’t. I—”

She’d figured that was coming: anyone as pragmatic as Abbot would probably run into that kind of roadblock and refuse to surmount it. “Because we work together?”

A dry, sour laugh left him as he pressed a kiss to her cheek, right in front of her ear. “No, not— no.” He pulled away, fingers brushing her hair out of her eyes. “Uh, because I’m on SSRIs,” he said quietly. “That’s why.”

Mohan digested that for a moment. SSRI’s: extremely helpful for depression or anxiety or PTSD or panic disorders. Worked by inhibiting serotonin reuptake, increasing the levels of it in the body. Side effects included insomnia. Headaches, sometimes. Nausea. And loss of sexual function. “Oh,” she said, understanding. “Okay. How long have you been on them?”

“Since I stopped being a combat medic,” he said quietly. “About eight, nine years.”

It wasn't like she could turn Doctor Mode off, honestly. "How long has it been since you last had sex?"

"Nine years," he said, voice gone low and tight. "You know, uh, the state of Pennsylvania says that your spouse, uh, can file for divorce if there is an irretrievable breakdown in the marriage. That's the exact phrase: *irretrievable breakdown.* And lack of intimacy falls under that umbrella." And then it all clicked into place. Why he never talked about his personal life, his past, why he was living like this and pouring every speck of his spare energy into work, into medicine, into helping people. He did not think he had anything else to give.

Mohan reached up and cupped him around the neck, brushing his jaw with her thumbs. "I'm sorry," she said, and this time she meant it. Tears shone in his eyes, red with lack of sleep. "Hey. It's okay. It's okay. Shh." She pulled him into a hug, a good tight one, and didn't stop until he slowly, finally brought his arms up to hug her back, bending his face down and nestling his nose into the dark space between her hair and her neck. "I don't have a life outside work," she said over his shoulder, eyes fixed on the wall. She was so tired she was sure she wasn't making any sense. "At all. I don't— do anything. Go anywhere. Have hobbies. This is all I have. But we're people. We're both people. Human beings. And I'm so glad I have you in my life, Abbot. In any way you are. In any way you can be or want to be. I'm glad I have you."

His hands slid up her back, pressing close and tight for a moment, and then he disentangled himself, letting go of her hand, sniffing and wiping his eye with the heel of his hand. "Why are you still here, huh?" he asked flatly, searching her face briefly before looking away, at the floor. "You should go. You shouldn't— you—" He sniffed again, tilted his head back. "Ah, shit," he said softly to the ceiling. "You should go."

"I don't want to leave you like this," she said.

"I'm not like anything. And anyway you— you shouldn't be— you—" Abbot swallowed, cut himself off, raked a hand through his salt-and-pepper curls. "Look at you, huh? You've got a whole life ahead of you. A career. Potential. What are you, twenty-five?"

"I'm thirty-one," she said, knowing damn well he knew exactly how old she was.

"Okay, thirty-one. I'm almost two decades older than you. I— not

even getting into the working together thing, let alone the, the power imbalance or whatever, okay, I'm divorced. I go to therapy once a week. I have a whole pharmacy's worth of anti-anxiety and anti-depression medication in the bathroom cabinet. I listen to police scanners when I can't sleep, which is pretty much every goddamn night. I think about jumping off the fucking roof of the hospital at least three times a month. All right? You— you don't want this. You don't want me." His voice cracked, and he rested his hand on the wall by her shoulder, balancing on his foot. "You don't. Trust me."

"You know," she said quietly, "I think we'd all be better off if we stopped telling other people what they want and just asked them what they wanted instead."

"Don't do this to me, Mohan," he whispered, shaking his head. "Don't. Don't let me think I can make this work out, don't let me think that I could ever have something more with a, with this brilliant, emotionally intelligent, beautiful doctor who—" He laughed, short and wry, and leaned in a little closer, closing his eyes. "Who won't, you know, get out of my fuckin' house to let me rot in misery on my sofa—"

She laughed. It stung her mouth, but she didn't care. "And who bought you dinner," she put in.

Abbot shook his head, half-smiling, wry humor in every line of his face. "Yeah, who bought me dinner and drove me home and patched me up; don't let me think this could ever happen in a million years. Come on. Just— just go." But he'd come so close that his forehead was touching hers, as if he was being pulled in against his will, surrendering to the tug. Like she was the MRI machine, and he was every piece of metal in the world, glittering and sharp, silver and ragged-edged and tumbling, tumbling, tumbling. "Just go," he said softly, his free hand slipping gently up her arm, over her sleeve. "Please, Samira. Please. Just go."

She'd forgotten how tired she was. How bone-deep exhausted she was, fourteen hours of a shift and now she should be sleeping, in her own bed in her bare-bones apartment back in the city and not up here in the suburbs. It had been so, so long since she'd even thought about sex, having sex, even going on a date: her life had been absorbed wholly by her job and there was no room to even think about anything else. So maybe it was like some kind of poetic justice that she'd dive into this with someone from her job. Someone she liked. Respected. Admired. Someone who admired and liked and respected

her back. And forget about the *attending and R3* bullshit: Abbot was inches from her face and he'd fall apart if she didn't say something quickly. "Okay," she whispered, tilting her mouth up and brushing his. "Okay, I'll go."

He leaned in closer, breathing roughly against her mouth, gliding down to press kisses along her cheek and his lips were gentle but chapped, dry. "Okay," he whispered, reaching up and tucking her hair behind her ear and kissing her forehead, too. "Okay."

"Any minute now. I'll go," she managed, her knees weak. "Just as soon as, you know. We wrap it up."

"Okay. Because I really want, I, I want you to get out of here," he moaned, open-mouthed against her neck, wet and hot and sloppy and his stubble was scraping her up like sandpaper and she just about collapsed, but she couldn't, she couldn't: he needed her. "So bad. I need. I need you to go." His nose traced the line of her throat, one hand caressing her shoulder, and she reached up and unzipped her hoodie, exposing her tank top. Abbot made a noise like he'd been stabbed and lifted his head, chin to her forehead, panting a little. "Fuck," he said thinly. "We gotta— we gotta move."

"Where?"

"Bedroom. Couch. Somewhere I don't need to use a hand to brace."

"I got you, let's go," she whispered, ducking under his arm and supporting him again, but this time she kept her head close to his, pressing little careful kisses down his weathered cheek and neck and he shivered against her, clung to her every step of the way to the bedroom. "I got you. Hey, I got you."

HOUR FIFTEEN

9:00-10:00

The bedroom was exactly as it had been when Mohan had left it. Quiet, cold, dark. She took Abbot to the bed, where they both collapsed down in the pitch black into sheets that smelled just like him, and she felt him shift, move up, feel out for her face and kiss her on the mouth again, slow and cautious, the exact opposite of his hands, which were trembling and roaming all over her neck, her shoulders, her chest and waist and back. Like he was trying to map her out in the dark, in only the dim light from the hallway.

"Want some light?" she asked hoarsely, breaking the kiss.

"Yeah, hold on," he told her, and the bed depressed and lifted and a bedside light clicked on, drenching the room in warm gold. Mohan sat up, ignoring the throbbing pain in her face as she unzipped her hoodie and shrugged out of it. Abbot sat on the edge of the bed and yanked his white T-shirt off over his head and oh, God, he *was* in good shape. She knew it. Had known it. Solid, strong, compact and wiry. Freckles, millions and millions of them, spattered his pale shoulders, the rounded curves of muscle there, across his back and arms. The light caught the sparse dusting of his arm and chest hair, glittering red, shining silver. The chain around his neck was stuck to the contours of his chest: dog tags, one hanging lower than the other on a small loop of chain separate from the larger one, and they glinted silver when he moved. He balled up the shirt and tossed it aside, and it was only then she realized he was looking at her, too, at the lines of her shoulders, the way her tank top dipped low enough to expose her collarbone but not quite low enough to show cleavage. "Can I?" he asked softly, eyes darting up to hers.

"Sure," she said, and let him lift the hem of her tank top, peel it upward over her head, and throw it aside. Underneath was just her bralette. Plain. Black. From the way he was staring, though, it might have been the fanciest piece of French lingerie on the planet. "You can touch me," she said softly.

"Yeah?" He reached out, brushed the back of his knuckles against her right breast. "It's… a thing, I think, that not a lot of people in our field talk about," he started off haltingly. "Uh, when you get so used to seeing… the human body as, you know, clinical, you start to… not be able to see it as anything but. No matter who it is. Even if you feel…

some type of way about them. Which, you know." His eyes creased, joining the tiny smile playing at his mouth. "Doesn't help the SSRI situation much."

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean," she agreed, reaching out and letting her fingers trace his sternum, the deep valley between the thick muscle of his pectorals. *Well-developed upper body, good symmetry, no sign of injury or abnormality* said her Dr. Mohan brain, and it took her a moment to settle into *my God he's good-looking.* "Well, last time I checked, you still had a mouth and a pair of working hands, Abbot."

The air left his lungs like he'd been punched. *"Hooo.* I sure do, Mohan. You got a preference?"

"Not as long as you know how to listen to directions," she told him, leaning back and peeling off her pants. Too late, she remembered she'd put on her ugliest, most comfortable pair of underwear: faded granny-panty briefs she'd had since college with bananas and monkeys printed all over them and *LET'S MONKEY AROUND* repeated through the pattern. Her mother had hated them in the store, said it was too suggestive, so she had sneaked back with a friend and bought them secretly and hid them in her bottom desk drawer for months and months. God, she hadn't thought about that in—

Abbot shifted his weight as he shucked off his bloodstained pants and pulled his legs up, one hand grazing her knee. "Nice underwear," he said, smiling— really smiling, bright and open, flashing his teeth, and they were so *cute:* one incisor was longer than the other and they overlapped and his pointed eyeteeth were slightly crooked, which gave him the appearance of a younger man, endearingly boyish. "Adorable."

"Shut up, Abbot," she said, hot around the ears as her nose and mouth throbbed. "Ow, don't embarrass me, it makes my face hurt."

"Not trying to. Here. You lean back against the headboard." She did, shuffling backward and centering herself as Abbot moved to lie down on his side, keeping his weight off his injury with his shoulders between her knees. "Lift up. There we go." She raised her left leg, resting it on his shoulder, and he reached up to press a kiss to her skin, to the inside of her thigh. Mohan shivered, feeling goosebumps rise on her skin from her scalp to her toes. She wanted to kiss him again, really kiss him: it was so unfair that her mouth was hurting, and— "And, uh, I think I'd like it if you called me Jack, actually," he told her before bending close, pressing his fingers in a V shape on

either side of the gusset of her underwear, and pushing gently, softly from the wrist to give her firm, broad pressure.

She twitched and let out a moan, curling her toes. Of course she knew the clitoral structure was far larger than just the clitoris itself, knew that in the medical sense: she'd just never experienced it in practice before with any other person like this. Each push of his fingers sent waves of deep, rippling sensation through her whole body. Those hands. Those fingers. Deft and sure and never doing a thing they did not need to do. Precise. Perfect. "Oh," she gasped, grabbing his sheets in her hands and taking slow, even breaths. "Oh my *God* don't stop doing that."

"Yeah? You gonna— I don't know, I think you could just come like this. I probably don't even need to do anything else." She forced her eyes open, gasping and shuddering, fighting the instinct to lock her knees and shove her pelvis up against his hand. His plain gray boxer-briefs were taut around his thighs, but loose at the crotch: that was fine, totally fine, it wasn't her and she knew it. She made herself look at his face. His curls were dark, matted down with sweat at his forehead, over his ears as he worked at her with the same intent determination she'd seen written in his expression a million times as he focused on an intubation or a dislocated shoulder or a chart. His dark eyes flashed up to hers, eyebrows angled up briefly, an expression crossing his face that almost seemed to be saying *is this right? Are you sure?* "You good up there?"

"Fuck," she choked, flinging her head back and twisting up into his hand. "Fuck, don't stop, Jack, Jack, don't—"

When it hit, it was soft. Warm. Gentle as a wave, pushing her up and up and over and letting her back down again like a swing. She lay there for a moment, panting for air, sweat cooling in the air of the room, and lifted her head to peer down at Abbot, who was leaning forward to kiss her between the legs, over her underwear, over the monkeys and bananas, and glanced up at her again, nose buried over her pubic mound. "Yeah?" he asked roughly, blinking.

"Yes. Yeah. Wow." She took another few breaths and pushed herself up to her elbows, wiping her hair out of her eyes as he shifted himself and her, put his injured leg behind him and knelt on his good one, pale freckled shoulders lifting her knees up. Farmer's tan: that was what the tan line where his shirtsleeves and collar— that was what it was called. The ring there between tan and pale skin demarcated the weathered skin of his throat, only freckled smoothness left to extend

down his chest and halfway down his arms. He hooked both thumbs into her underwear, but she reached down, fully aware of how bad she had to smell after a fourteen hour shift. “I— I’m not, I don’t—”

“We both fucking reek, Samira,” he said gravely. “I promise you I don’t give a shit.”

“Can’t possibly be worse than C.diff, anyway,” she said, laughing as he slid his thumb up into the leg hole and pulled the gusset of her panties to the right side, exposing her to the air of the the room. Her laugh morphed into a little yelp as he leaned down and closed his eyes, laying the flat of his tongue against her, his nose buried in her dark hair and oh, God, God, God, his tongue. She jerked her right leg out straight as he lapped at her, as he brought his tongue up to the apex and gave her a few soft, kittenish licks that heated her skin and made her breath come faster but didn’t do much for the actual process of reaching orgasm. “Fuck, just— harder, and heavier, like with your fingers,” she panted, reaching down and grabbing his hair, the damp curls, lank with sweat. He moaned as she tightened her grip, and it sent a vibration through her so strong that she had to fight to not kick him. “Fuck-ing- *shit* oh and I need um, um I need fingers or s-something in me if you’re gonna—”

“Mmm,” he hummed, eyes closed, and Samira curled her head forward, body taut with concentration as he teased her apart somewhere below his chin, open, slick and full and his fingers slid in, curled, pumped. Was it two? Three? She had no idea: whatever it was, it was perfect, and she tightened her grip on his hair as he set the rhythm, pressing against her clit with every push deep into her body. Hard and heavy, just like she’d said, and it took her a moment of concentration but she caught the rhythm and rode it up, up, up until her vision was glittering with stars and noises she didn’t know she could make were pouring out of her mouth. And then she came back down, melting, panting in a nest of sheets and blankets and sweat. A mouth was kissing her naked thigh, a bristly cheek scouring her skin. “Hey,” he was whispering. “You still with me?”

“Y—uh. Yeah,” she stammered, unable to remember how to talk while her brain was floating in a warm hot-tub soup of dopamine and serotonin and whatever other feel-good hormones existed when someone had an orgasm twice in a row. She couldn’t remember their names. Samira brought her hands up to rub across her forehead, avoiding the tender swelling on her cheek, her nose, her mouth. Funny how she hadn’t been able to feel the pain for a moment there. “I want,” she managed, and swallowed: her mouth had gone dry.

“Come— come up here. Jack. Please.”

He shifted between her legs, let them down as he crawled up her body and planted himself on his side to her left, one arm snaking around her waist as he curled in, kissing her jaw. “I’m here,” he rasped, nose pressing into her cheek, stubble scraping her tender skin. “Hey. I’m here. What do you need?”

“Just you,” she whispered, shifting to half-roll and wrap her arm around his chest, running her hand over his body. Freckles, so many freckles. She traced the line on his collarbone where milky freckled skin met weather-beaten tan, bumped over the dog-tag chain. It smelled like wet iron, this close to his body. “Skin cancer risk factor,” murmured Mohan, noting the contrast between her slender brown fingers and his sunless, ghostly chest. “Hm.”

“That’s part of the included Being Almost Fifty And White package,” he said, chuckling. “But don’t worry. I wear sunblock, and I see a dermatologist every six months.”

“Good.” She bent her head and kissed his chest, right over his heart, and when he let out a little satisfied noise she did the same on the other side of his chest to mirror it, then slid down to his nipples, pressing her tongue along the little flat discs of delicate skin and sucking gently, playing with him, nipping a little, until Abbot grunted and twisted under her mouth. Then she did it to the other side. He reacted faster over here, a little yelp and a jerking movement. More sensitive on the left? Maybe. She kissed him to soothe any leftover sting and raised her head to look at him. “Your body hair is red in some places.”

“Yeah. Recessive genetics does— does that,” he mumbled, closing his eyes as she took his hand, pressed it to her bralette, made him palm her. Cup her. Squeezed her own tit, using his hand as a tool to do it. “Shit,” he bit off sharply, and pushed himself up against the headboard, sitting upright so he could use both hands to touch her— and God, did he touch her. His thumbs slipped over the tightening points of her nipples below the fabric over and over, and once he’d had his fill of that, he discarded her bralette and threw it somewhere into the mess of his floor. She didn’t care. His eyes were pinned to her chest, and he reached out gently, cupping her, thumbing over her dark nipples, lifting and squeezing. Always gentle. So gentle. Almost too gentle, actually: he didn’t need to be that gentle where this was concerned, but he didn’t know. She hadn’t told him.

“You can, um, pinch me a little if you want,” she offered, half-shy of expressing it, but his face lit up with interest and he pinched her softly, steady pressure increasing until it felt like a lightning bolt straight to her gut and she arched her back with a moan, shuddering against him. “Fuck—”

Abbot patted his thigh. “Lap. Come here. Get into my lap, let me— put your hands on the headboard.” She swung a leg over him and gripped the headboard with both hands. “Yeah, like that,” he whispered, and she ground down against his crotch: was that just soft flesh, or was there something, maybe, starting to happen in his boxer-briefs? It didn’t matter. She braced herself on the headboard and let him bury his face in her chest, grip her body, slide his hands up and down the length of her back and her sides as his mouth crushed against her soft flesh, tongue lapping, teeth nipping, stubble rasping her tenderest spots.

She realized she was humping him. It hadn’t been intentional, but she was half-conscious of it, of her rocking body, of the steadily pulsing flow and ebb between her legs as he sucked and bit and pinched and moaned and scraped against her and really, who in this room was going to say no to a third orgasm? So she ground down, panting for air as she closed her eyes and gripped his head with one hand and the headboard of his bed with the other. Maybe he wouldn’t notice. She wanted him to notice. She wanted him to— “Ah, fuck,” he groaned against her chest, hot and damp. “Shit, Samira, you’re gonna use me like this, huh, get off on me, not even— you do this alone, huh? In your room? In your apartment?” She couldn’t even speak at this point: she let out a very stupid and unsexy noise that was halfway to a meow and halfway to a humiliated giggle. It didn’t put him off. “Yeah? You hump something and think about me?” His teeth pressed into her soft skin, and she squirmed in his lap with a choked cry, tightening her grip on his hair, flinging her head back, she was so fucking close, so close. “Maybe I think about you too, huh? Like a goddamn pervert, yeah, here alone in my house and sometimes maybe I even get hard but I can’t fuckin’ come, I can’t finish, I try and try until I’m fuckin’ raw but I can’t, I can’t, thinkin’ about you’s not enough Samira I gotta, I gotta, I—”

She slammed her pelvis down into his thigh and ground out her third orgasm, clutching him and shouting aloud in some kind of hoarse bark while he held onto her, held her up until she finished, really finished, and folded down on his shoulder, sweating and trembling like a leaf in a strong breeze. He turned his head into her neck and kissed her, soft and warm and bristly. “Jack,” she gasped, shifting her weight, her

knees, her thighs. Something was pressing against her right thigh, the thigh planted between his legs. Something that hadn't been there before. "Are you—"

"Yeah. Probably not gonna be able to finish," he whispered. "But I'll try."

"What, uh, what time do you normally take your meds?" She was already rolling away from him, slipping her underwear off while he lifted his hips and tugged off his boxer-briefs and then she got a good look at him. Dark triangle of reddish-brown hair, shot with silver. Thick. Heavy. Broad. And very, very hard.

"Uh, normally right when I get home at eight-twenty, eight-thirty. I guess— I guess another couple of minutes won't hurt."

"Sexual function caused by SSRIs can sometimes be somewhat restored if the affected person delays their medications until after sex," said Mohan, rolling back and measuring out the angles of approach with her eyes. "Um— how about you stay right where you are? How's your leg?"

"Jesus, Samira," he said, a laugh in his voice. "I'm about to have sex for the first time in nine years and you're worried about a couple of scrapes? Get over here. I'll tell you if it's that bad."

"Well, someone's got to worry about you," she whispered, throwing her leg over his hips as he leaned back, upright against the headboard with a pillow crammed behind his lower back for support. "Okay. You just don't— don't move. I got this."

"Oh, really? Good, because for a second I was thinking I'd have to do all the—" His teasing tone died as Samira covered his mouth with her hand to shut him up and used her other hand to adjust him, sinking herself down onto him, thick and hot, and he moaned behind her palm, then kissed her there, tickling her hand with his stubble. She grunted a little, working on acclimating to him because really, she should have asked if he had lube first but there was no way she was gonna stop now, not with his mouth open on her palm and his eyes open, focused wholly on her, intent as a scalpel in the hand of a surgeon. Abbot turned his face, then; kissed her hand, pushed her fingers apart with his nose, and sucked her thumb into his mouth, maintaining eye contact the entire time.

She almost melted, fell apart right there in his lap with his dick inside her. His cheeks hollowed around her thumb, the soft insides of his

mouth swallowing her just like her body was swallowing him and his teeth nudged at her skin, his tongue wrapping around her. It was obscene: looked obscene, felt incredible, felt— "I'm a t-team player, in case you forgot. I'm very good at doing my part," she managed, slipping the rest of her hand down to rest along his jaw with her thumb still in his mouth as she lifted herself up a little awkwardly on her knees and sat back down, sensation lighting her nerves on fire from her gut to her knees. Abbot groaned around her thumb and gripped her hips with his hands, parting his mouth and releasing her. She made to move her hand, but he shook his head frantically.

"No, no, keep your hand there, yeah, like that. Fuck. Just— this," he managed, and tilted her hips back and forth, back and forth until she got it: a simple movement leveraged by her spine and hip sockets that thrust him in deep and hard and didn't use a lot of energy. "Oh, *fuck,"* he gasped against her thumb, eyes rolling back in his head as he mouthed helplessly at her skin, tongue, lips, teeth. His voice rolled low down into a mutter, a growl, something half stream-of-consciousness. "Aaah, fuck. Fuck. Shit. Fuck, I want, I wanna come."

She couldn't think of a single thing to say. "Yeah? You do?"

"Aaah, shit, shit yeah." His foot was planted on the bed behind her, his knee bent, which gave him enough leverage to kind of thrust up in short, hard little strokes in tandem with her rolling hips. He only misjudged her rhythm once, slipping out, and quickly reset himself, gasping against her fingers. "Yeah, but you should come first. Shit. You need to come first, you gonna, you gotta come and use m-me and then you're gonna leave. Right? Huh?"

"Yeah, sure I wanna come first," she gasped, bouncing a little, her thick hair half loose and streaming by now over one shoulder. "Before I go. Oh, God, *fuck* —"

Sweat was matting down his hair, gleaming on his skin. They were stinking up this room to high heaven and she did not give a single shit. "Aaaah *fuck* but you already c-came three times, let me have it, don't let me have it Samira but let me have it, please—"

He hadn't needed to add in *don't let me have it* : she understood. She had picked up enough on his little psychological idiosyncrasies in the past two hours to know that when he was asking for something, what he really wanted was a *no.* And after all, this kind of energy, this dynamic he was seeking— that was often something people in positions of authority wanted in this kind of situation. To relinquish

authority, decision-making. To just be told what to do. Even if it was an illusion, even if it was play-acting. Samira knew that damn well from psychology classes, from sexual health seminars, from so, so many classes and medical journals. He didn't need to be reminded of his sexual issues; he needed to immerse himself in them. Engage them. Maybe it would help. Even if this was the only time. Even if it didn't work physically. Emotional release was still a kind of release.

"No," she gasped, trying to find the right words. "No, I want it, I want to be first, you always let me go first, you wanted, you, gave me special treatment, didn't want it, goddammit I even bought you *dinner* —"

His pupils were dilated, his breathing was going ragged, and a flush stained his cheeks and forehead and nose and down to his chest. "Please," he gasped against her hand, licking like a dog, kissing, moaning, squirming under her, *"please* let me come, Samira, please let me—"

Very lightly, but very firmly, she slid her other hand down to his throat and gripped the chain around his neck, tags tangled in her fingers: not nearly strong enough to choke off air or blood, but enough to let him know where she was as she pulled his face upward to look at her, as her fingers circled his throat in a clumsy grab, thumb and fingers tangled in chain and mashed against his skin. *"No,"* she snarled, low and black in a tone she didn't even know she could take as the one remaining logical part of her brain informed her *jeez, Samira, you're crazier than he is.*

"Holy God fuck shit shit *shit,"* he blurted out, eyes rolling into the back of his head, and that expression, that look on his face was enough to send her right over the edge, clutching down on him, bearing down, crying out her climax into the cold air of the room as her hands flew off him and planted on the headboard. Abbot gripped her tight, lips parted, eyes glassy, distant, and face blank, almost twitching— concentrating— and then he sucked down air with a high, drawn-out wail, hoarse and rough and trembling; an inarticulate, helpless cry repeated again and again in lower and lower pitches as he rocked up into her now-pliant body and his hands gripped her skin hard enough to bruise. Her lip and nose throbbed as the last of her orgasm receded and she looked down, just making sure he was okay as he slumped back against the headboard, throat exposed, chin tilted up. Samira ran her hand through his hair, pushing the greasy curls away off his heated skin, kissing his forehead as he struggled to collect himself, to breathe. Tears filled his eyes and dripped from the outer

corners, down his temples.

“You good?” she whispered, tenderly running her thumb over his cheekbone, over the freckles like a million tiny stars, over the soft weathered skin as she wiped his tears away. “Jack?”

“Mm,” he groaned, moving his head around in a way that could have conceivably been intended as a nod. “Mmm-hmm.”

“I’m gonna get, um, off you now. Okay?”

His hands tightened on her waist, the fingers trembling. “Stay,” he whispered. “Just for— just stay. Please.”

“Okay. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.” She rested her elbows on the headboard and breathed deeply, watching him slowly revive, come back to life like a watered fern. “Hi. You with me?”

“Think so.” He lifted his arm, exposing a damp thatch of reddish-brown hair, and turned his head, wrinkling his nose. “God. How about a shower?”

“Yeah? Want me to go get a plastic bag?” Samira bent down and kissed him again, soft and slow and careful because really, her lip was starting to hurt a lot, but he didn’t seem to mind as he sighed into her mouth and stroked soft circles with his fingers into her waist, her hip, her ass.

“Wouldn’t mind one. And then, uh, I need a hand getting to the bathroom, if you wouldn’t mind,” he murmured, slow and loose and languid like unspooling string.

“Be right back,” she told him, peeling herself off him and ignoring the sticky sensation between her legs as she walked naked to the kitchen. Everything felt pleasantly used, full and swollen and a little warm as she bent to get a plastic bag and walk back to the bedroom. In the hallway, lit by the morning sun, she paused: the cool air of the house drifted over her sweat-stained body.

He asked me to help him. That was something, wasn’t it? Not caring about being embarrassed. After all, the most embarrassing thing you could do with someone was sex, wasn’t it? Body parts smushed up against each other, smells, noises, involuntary vocalizations. Yeah. Maybe this… maybe this could be something.

Samira walked back into the bedroom, bag in hand. “Okay, you,” she

said, kneeling down to secure it below his knee. “Shower time, and then I think we both need some sleep.”

It wasn’t exactly Samira’s fault that the plan had been one thing and now it had become another: that *shower and sleep* had become *shower, then kissing, then getting eaten out like Jack Abbot’s life depends on it on the shower floor.* Thank God his bathroom was mobility-friendly: she had a tile bench to sit on with her knees spread and raised and locked around his head as he knelt, hands curled around her thighs as hot water gushed down on them, one of her arms up against the glass wall and the other in his clean, wet hair. The sound of water pattering against the plastic bag on his leg sounded like rain, joining the rest of the noises: slick squishy sounds from Abbot’s mouth and her own moans.

“Please, fuck, please please please Jack—”

“Mmm *mmm,”* he groaned, and she shuddered into what had to be, what, her fifth? Fifth orgasm of the day? Her thighs were sore. This was completely unsustainable. Samira untangled her legs and took several deep breaths with her head resting against the shower wall, chin up, feeling the hot water and the steam as she reached down blindly, gripped him by the dog tags like a wayward puppy, and hauled him, all pale rounded shoulders and compact muscle, up her body to kiss him on the mouth. He tasted like skin, fresh and clean and just a hint of some barely alkaline-musk flavor lingering around his cheeks and on his tongue that she knew without being told was her. She chased it into his mouth, sucking and moaning, until, trembling a little, he broke the kiss and nosed up against her jaw, panting a little for air. “We’re gonna waste all my hot water,” he moaned into her skin as he slid down to her neck. “God, it’s so late. We gotta get to bed.”

“But we don’t have to go to work tomorrow,” she whispered, cradling his head with a sigh as he lapped up the water pooling in the hollow of her throat. *“Oh…* we have, um, paid time off, we don’t…”

“I have to, uh. At some point. Leave the house and get my car.” His hand had migrated up to the nape of her neck, cradling her, fingers coiled into her wet black hair. “I think. I think I have a car, right? In the hospital parking lot?”

Samira laughed, then winced and touched her mouth. “Ow.”

“I’ll fix that. Come on.” He shut the water off and helped her to her

feet, leaning on her and the door as she helped him in turn leave the shower and settle down on a stool by the sink so he could take his plastic bag off and dry himself off with a towel. She rubbed herself down and looked around for moisturizer, but found none: of course he didn't have any.

"Next time, I'm bringing my own toiletries," she teased, scrunching up her hair in the towel from soaked to damp. Then she bit her cheek: next time? What was she saying?

If Abbot took any notice of that, he didn't show it. He unscrewed three different prescription bottles and tossed back a handful of pills dry, handing her an 800mg tablet of ibuprofen and a cup of water. "Sorry. All I have is sunblock, Vaseline, soap, and shaving cream."

Samira swallowed it down. "You know, I hate to say it, but throw me the Vaseline." He reached over and tossed the little pale yellow tub to her, and she rubbed the petroleum jelly into her elbows and knees and the dry skin on her chin and hands. At least that would hydrate something. Her hair was just going to have to deal. "Okay. All good?"

"Mm, yeah." Abbot shoved himself up on his foot, reached for her, and slung himself easily over her shoulders as she helped him out of his bathroom and back to the bedroom, which, compared with the clean smell of the bathroom and the soap and shampoo, reeked of sex. She did not care: the bed was comfortable and waiting for them and she was exhausted so she set Abbot down on the edge, then crawled over him and curled up naked under the sheets.

"Come on. I'm beat."

Abbot turned, surveying her with a small smile. "You're on my side of the bed."

She flashed him a grin just small enough to not tug on her lip. "Squatter's rights. Get in here." He stretched briefly, then slid himself in beside her, tugging up the sheet with one hand and turning out the light with the other. Pitch blackness swallowed them. She reached out in the dark and found him, warm and alive, and inched closer, her arm across his chest as he shifted and moved to wrap his arm around her.

Her forearm, stretched across his sternum, could feel his heartbeat, his pulse: *ba-bump ba-bump ba-bump.* The human body had ten, maybe twelve pints of blood in it. All of it, rushing under his skin, under her arm, *ba-bump.* Rivers of it in tiny veins, just below their skin, both

their skin, running all night, all day, every day. Mohan shut her eyes and breathed in the clean scent of him mixed with the smells of them both on the bedsheets: unscented soap, warm sleeping man, sex, old deodorant and sweat. The smells of life. Life, and blood, and sex, and she was so tired. So tired.

Stay, he'd said, *stay.* Rivers below their skin, glittering blood, a million tiny stars across his body. Silver and red, silver and red.

Yes. Yes, she'd stay.

HOUR ???

????-????

She came out of a deep, dead sleep in the dark. Someone had said something to her, someone, and it was pitch-black— she'd fallen asleep in the OR or something and they'd turned off the lights, shit, she had to get down to the Pitt and apologize to Dr. Robby for wasting his—

The bed she was in was firm and warm and smelled slightly stale, musty as she moved. No. Right. No, she wasn't in the hospital, she was in Abbot's bed in Abbot's house and something had startled her to wakefulness. "Jack?" she croaked, heavy-eyed with interrupted REM sleep.

"Sorry, Chief, I didn't set my alarm," his voice said, heavy and slow and half-awake somewhere from the other side of the bed. "I didn't… oh-eight hundred, support, don't know what— *time* it is uuuuhhhh, uh medics, team, don't—"

Was he asleep? Dreaming? "It's okay. You got the day off, remember?"

There was a quiet lull, only the hum of the air conditioning making a noise. Just the air, and his breathing, and her own heartbeat. Then the mattress depressed again, heavy and solid, and Samira reached out in the dark, finding Abbot and curling close. He smelled like himself: clean soap, skin, hair. "Hey," he mumbled, kissing her head as she put her cheek on his chest. "Sorry, Mohan. I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't," she answered, hand on his bare chest. Sleep-warm, clammy with sweat. "Bad dream?"

"Mm." His chin rested on her head and he sighed. "Not sure this isn't a dream, too."

"I promise I am very real," she whispered against his skin, and kissed him on the left pectoral. His pulse was strong, but it quickened under her hand, her mouth. *Ba-bum ba-bum ba-bum.* Abbot shifted his hips a little, scooting himself closer to her body and rolling sideways, her head sliding down to his arm. "Hi," she whispered, left arm around his torso and her right folded up between them. "Still think it's a dream?"

"Mm. Nope." He kissed her forehead and sighed against her skin, a

warm gust of damp air ghosting over her ear. “How’s your face?”

“It’s talking to me, but it’s not too bad right now. If I sit up, it’ll probably be worse.” She rubbed his back, fingertips tracing over his soft skin, exploring a few rough patches. Tiny raised moles up near his shoulders. The thin, delicate crepe-paper texture of a few scattered stretchmarks near his armpit. “How’s your leg?”

“Ah, the Ranger candy took the edge off. Probably should check it for seepage and replace the bandages by now. But it’s not urgent.”

Samira smiled faintly, amused. “Ranger candy?”

He chuckled, his hand mapping out the contours of her back in the dark. The ends of her hair. “That’s what 800 milligram ibuprofen pills in the Army. Prescribed for everything. Cure-all. Headache? Ranger candy. Sprained ankle? Shot? Ranger candy.”

She drew her brows together into the blind dark. “You were a Ranger medic in the Army?”

He didn’t answer. But his hand paused on her back, over the long firm muscles that bracketed her spine, and he rubbed her skin with his thumb softly, in short little strokes. “You go back to sleep,” he murmured. “I’ll call in to Admin and tell ‘em I ordered you to stay home and recover until you’re back to normal.”

“Coming back to bed, though, right?” she mumbled, already half-gone as he swung himself upward.

“Mm-hmm. Go back to sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

When she came back up out of the dark again, it was to candlelight. Abbot was sitting on the floor, head resting against the bottom of his pile of unfolded laundry, injured leg raised on a pillow and his other one bent, knee up, foot flat. His phone was facedown on the carpet by him. He looked like he was napping, and she rolled over as quietly as she could, looking at him. At the candlelight, which was coming from a half-burned down Yankee candle on his dresser, just a hint of dim, dim yellow lighting only part of him and casting everything else in black, thick shadow. It smelled like lilacs. A sharp floral scent, masking the smell of sex and unwashed sheets. She wondered how he’d gotten to the phone. He’d left it in the living room: he’d probably had to bear crawl or something, and that made her feel guilty, but he’d told her to sleep. Maybe he’d wanted to do it for himself. She

could understand that, absolutely. If Abbot was one thing, it was fiercely self-sufficient. Taking so much onto his own shoulders, refusing to put it anywhere else. Kind of like her. So much like her.

Mohan sat up and pushed the sheets off, swinging her feet down and creeping over to him. Lifting his phone, she noted the time: almost nine PM. They'd slept the whole day away. Incredible. But maybe not that crazy, considering the day they'd both had. And she could stand to have another meal. Maybe something more substantial than tater tots.

"Jack," she whispered, laying a hand on his knee, and he jerked awake like a shot had been fired, striking out with an elbow in her general direction and shielding his face as a choked gasp burst from his throat. "Oh, *whoa.* Sorry. Hey. It's just me."

"Shit, Mohan," he rasped, pulling his hand down his cheek. "Fuck. Sorry, I'm sorry. Did I hit you?"

"No, no, no. You're good. I was just checking on you." She reached out and covered his hand with both of hers, but it was trembling, his pulse thudding behind his skin under her fingers, so she tried to think of anything to say that would get his mind off whatever nightmare he'd had. "Are you hungry? There's a place I like on Penn that does chicken biryani. Uber Eats. They do brown rice, um, and vegan options. Their chickpea potato is really good, too, and the spinach paneer, but I think my favorite's the gongura chicken, honestly. I don't know how well you can handle spice. But it's not that spicy. And brown rice, which my mom always said was healthier than basmati, but—"

"Samira," he said, holding her hand. "I'm fine."

"And— oh. Okay. You sure? Have you slept a lot since— what time did I go back to sleep?"

"Uh, I think I woke you up around three. You went right back to sleep. I called work, handled all of that. Changed out my bandages. And then I came back here and just sat on the floor for a while."

"You were… watching me sleep?" she asked, sitting back on her heels.

"No. I was keeping an eye out. I couldn't sleep. Uh—" He rubbed his eyes. "If I'm being honest, that stretch from, when did we— ten in the morning? — to three was the longest I've slept uninterrupted in…

shit, uh, like two and a half years."

"Side effect of the SSRIs?"

"No, side effect of the PTSD," he said, mouth twisting into one of his dry smiles. "My therapist says that my brain needs to learn to quiet down and regulate, however that happens, but I just don't, uh, exactly have the time to unpack that, ever."

"Well, you might now. Little recovery time."

"Maybe I don't want to unpack it," he said, his expression unreadable. "Maybe this is all I get. Maybe I— I guess I like the familiarity, you know, knowing exactly what issues to expect from my own mind and at this point I don't…" He exhaled hard, ran his hand over his head from back to front, pulled it down his face, rubbed his jaw. "Maybe I don't know who I am without them anymore."

Samira sat down next to him, close, skin to skin, and laid her head on his shoulder. "You are a really, really good doctor," she said quietly, and felt his chest tremble beneath her. "And a good man. And a wonderful mentor and friend, and an attending physician who cares about the people beneath him." Wet drops fell on her forehead, and Abbot silently reached out and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, tugging her close into his side.

His voice was a quiet, pained tone when he spoke again. "I'm sorry, Mohan."

"What are you sorry for?"

A short, sour laugh burst from his throat. "I'm— God, what am I sorry for? I'm sorry my house is a mess. I'm sorry my bedroom's a fucking wreck and the sheets are gross, and my laundry hasn't been done in weeks and my— I didn't have stuff for guests, for you, I didn't—" Samira wrapped her arm around his back, rubbing his shoulders gently, soothing circles as his voice broke and cracked and turned into outright sobs. "And I'm sorry I'm a walking mess, and I'm sorry I went kind of nuts on you in bed, and I'm sorry I told you I think about killing myself and I'm sorry I snapped at you, I shouldn't have done that because you were just trying to help, and that's not what a good person does, that's not— what a good *doctor* does, so I'm sorry you think I'm one because I'm not, I'm not. I'm not—"

She shifted her weight, turned, and embraced him with both arms as tightly as she could. "Shh," she whispered, petting his hair, his neck,

his shoulders: everywhere she could reach as he curled into her arms and cried. “Hey, hey, hey. Hey. Shh. It’s okay. It’s okay. Shh, Abbot. Jack. Shh. It’s okay. I’m not gonna let go of you. I’m not. Not until you’re done, okay? It’s okay. I am right here and I’m not letting go. I’m not letting go.”

Slowly, his quiet, pained sobbing petered off into heavy, damp breaths. He nosed up against her skin, pliable and warm, heavy on her shoulder. “Thank you,” he croaked, bringing his hand up to cling to her arm. “For not letting go.”

Samira pressed her lips together into a line, not caring about the pain as tears rolled down her own cheeks, stinging the breaking scab with saltwater. “Anytime,” she whispered, sniffing hard and trying to compose herself. “Yeah. Anytime, okay? But I really have to tell you, I'm starving, and dinner’s on you this time.”

“I just—” He turned his head, breathed against her throat. “Can we just. Lay down in bed? Not to— not for sex or anything, you know, just— I just want to hold you.”

“Yeah, we can do that. Sure.” She kissed his cheek and stood, helping him up and over to the bed. “I think you’re gonna need a hand for a while until you heal up enough to put on that old leg.”

“Ah, I can get around fine on one. It just looks real stupid, a grown man hopping like a flamingo.” He sank down and pulled her down with him, side by side, sliding himself down so that he was eye-level with her throat, head tucked under her chin, and his arms circling her.

“Well, I bet you look great.” Mohan relaxed against him, arms bent up along his back, playing with his hair. Great hair. Soft curls, not a hint of thinning, streaked gray and dark. Maybe when he’d been young, it had been brown. Or reddish, like his body hair. She raked her fingers gently along his scalp, combed through the curls, twisted them around her fingers idly. “Like a very sexy flamingo. A DILF-y flamingo.”

“A DILF-y flamingo,” he repeated, laughter hitching his voice.

She grinned over his head to the wall. “Yeah, you know. Hard around the edges. Silver fox. Kind of… wiry, you know. With freckles, cute hair, and really sexy arms.”

He spoke softly against her throat, heat spreading up her skin. “Flamingos have wings, Dr. Mohan, not arms.”

“I’m an emergency medicine resident, not a zoologist, sor- *ry*. Very sexy wings, then,” she joked, and he laughed for real this time, his hands slipping up to the ends of her hair.

“You have gorgeous hair, you know,” he whispered.

“Yeah? Thanks. Go buy me some deep conditioner and maybe it won’t look like a mess after I shower.”

“It doesn’t look like a mess. It’s beautiful.” He tipped his chin up and kissed her just on the lower lip, the unbroken one, and she hummed, running her fingers through the close-cut hair at the nape of his neck. “Really beautiful.” Abbot’s fingers slipped through her dry strands, finger-combing with the utmost gentleness. “When you did that pigtail catheter procedure, that day, your first day… the curls in front of your safety glasses. Hanging down. Brushing your cheek.” He reached up a hand and brushed her skin, just over her cheekbone, near her eye, and tucked a loose strand back. “God, you looked…”

“When I was covered in blood and wearing a big smock?” she asked, smiling. “I bet I looked like a dumpster fire.”

Abbot smiled. “Yeah. No, you looked beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.”

There was no way she was this horny again. No way. But heat was puddling deep in her gut, making her rub her thighs together and making her breath come a little ragged and her cheeks warm. “Quit that, Abbot. You’re making me blush.”

“I thought I told you to call me Jack.”

“And I thought you said you weren’t trying to get me back into bed for sex.”

He had absolutely no business sounding that innocently smug. “I wasn’t. Why, is something going on with you that you need to tell me about?”

“Oh, screw you,” she gasped, and kissed him hard, really kissed him, ignored the broken scab and the faint taste of blood as she shoved her tongue into his mouth and sucked at his lip and he groaned deep in his chest, hitched himself further up the bed, planted a hand by her head, and returned it, every movement: tongue tracing her lower lip, teeth pressed into her mouth. “Mmm—” she moaned, slipping her hands up his back and back down to his bare ass, cupping him firmly and squeezing.

“Not gonna be much of anything happening on my end,” he whispered, breaking the kiss. “God damn, I wish it was, though.”

“You took your medication earlier, right, I know. Yeah.” Maybe part of her had hoped that the success he’d had before they’d both passed out was due to some kind of wildly romantic, sexual attraction so powerful it had overridden science and biology, but that was stupid. Function was function and dysfunction was dysfunction and that was that. “It’s okay. I’ll just, I’ll get myself off, sorry.”

“No, wait. I got an idea.” He kissed her again and shifted, rearing back up on his knees with a grunt, then lying down sort of perpendicular to her body, rolling in close and maneuvering her until her legs were up in the air, draped over his hips, both of their bodies forming a T shape. “Okay. Here. The vaginal canal doesn’t go straight up, right? It’s at an angle.”

She bit her lip, muffling a laugh. “God, *please* don’t call it a vaginal canal, that’s so clinical—”

“Sorry, I really don’t like *cunt* or *pussy* or *gooch* or whatever else the kids are saying these days,” he said, laughing as he used both hands under her thighs to gently finger at her, spread her open. Samira forgot her objections to his vocabulary and made a little sound of surprise as he slid in a finger, exploring her. “So it’s at an angle. Like this.” He moved his hand, and there was a slight loss of friction, an emptiness. More clinical. Still kind of hot, weirdly, though: *yes, Dr. Abbot, manually examine me, ooooh.* “That’s meeting the angle. Matching it. But if I do *this,* then I’m pressing up against the anterior wall—” and he moved his hand, his fingers, doing something else and making her squirm a little as his middle and third shifted and pushed hard up against the front of her insides. “And that stimulates both the G-spot and the the clitoral network, which I’m sure you don’t need to be told is a lot more than just the clitoris itself, it’s all these parts inside here,” Abbot touched her carefully, pressing on the outside of her body near the upper right quadrant of her labia and she moaned: that felt *good,* “that also fill up with blood during arousal—homologous to the penis, actually, there's a little medical fact for you — and can feel really pleasurable to touch.”

“Oh, my *God,”* she whimpered, not knowing whether to look down at him or fling her head back and just feel it as he pressed again and again in rolling movements while his fingers started pumping inside, thick and full… but swiftly not enough, not nearly enough. “Another finger, I need, I—”

“Yes, ma’am,” he breathed, and slid in his index along his other two, which made her gasp and lift her hips and reach out to grab anything she could, anything at all as Abbot lay on his side with his arm muscles straining from fucking her with his hands and just stared at her like she was the most incredible thing she’d ever seen as he talked her through it. “I got you. You just breathe. Okay? God, you’re beautiful. I’m gonna keep doing this, Samira. I’m gonna keep doing this until you finish. I got you. I got you.”

She hitched in a stammering breath, gasping. It was borderline too much. Too much, and still not enough, and everything in her hitched up and up under his fingers until she was bearing down on his hand as a full-throated, crazy shriek erupted from her throat, followed by desperate, smeared sounds as she plummeted down and down and down. Melting. Puddling. Nothing at all. Warm and sweaty and gasping, her pulse pounding in her stinging lip, her bruised nose.

Abbot pulled his hands away, popped his fingers into his mouth, sucked them clean like he savored the taste of her, kissed her knee, and moved himself back up the bed to lie down beside her on his side as she tried to remember how to put more than two words together. “Take your time,” he whispered, tenderly stroking back the hair from her forehead before he slipped an arm under her neck, cradling her in his arms as she limply curled into him, forehead against his chest. “Shh. You take your time. I’m right here. And I’m not letting go, Samira. Not until you’re done. I’m not letting go.”

An hour later, Samira Mohan was lying with her head in Jack Abbot’s lap on the bed, the taste of gongura chicken lingering on her tongue and her eyes half open as his deft, nimble fingers combed through her hair, stroking, braiding, coiling.

And for the first time in years, she was thinking— not about work or her rotations or anything else, no— she was thinking about Abbot’s hands, his fingers, his soft eyes and his gentle touch. His mind, his body, his heart and his soul, and how they all slotted into her own, so perfectly, as perfectly as a pair of hands, interlocked fingers.

“We gotta get your car,” she said drowsily.

“Mm. Car can wait another day. You wanna stick around another night?” He twisted a curl around his finger and smoothed it, looking down at her with muted hope in his eyes. “Just, you know. You don't have to. But I need a hand around here if I’m gonna be off my leg.

Doctor's orders."

"Smart doctor," she murmured, smiling up at him as he bent down and kissed her softly.

"Very smart doctor. Mm-hmm. I think she had an ulterior motive, though. I don't know."

Samira pushed herself upright and cupped the back of his neck in her palm. "Maybe she did," she told him, bumping her nose against his gently. "Or maybe she just really cared about you."

His mouth twitched. "Yeah? I don't know, Doc. You think she's gonna stick around after seeing the mess?"

"I think you should see her kitchen before you start talking about mess." Mohan kissed him again, at the corners of his mouth, gentle and warm. "Of course I'm staying," she whispered, just so there wouldn't be any question about it. "You're not gonna be able to get rid of me that easy."

"Damn," he breathed, open mouth brushing hers. "I really should have pretended the house was full of cat shit and rats."

She laughed and patted his thigh. "Too late. Hey, how about you let me strip the bed and wash the sheets, and you can fold your laundry?"

"Yeah?" He pulled back a little, searching her face. "I'd, uh. Appreciate the help," he said quietly. "Been a while since I've, uh, had the— you know. Time."

Somehow, she didn't think time was the real factor here. "Well, my mom always said breaking down a big task into a bunch of small easy ones helps you get the job done faster. Pretty good trick." Samira kissed his shoulder. "Hate to admit she was right. Come on. I'll help you out to the living room."

"You, uh. You're a good— a good doctor, Mohan," he said quietly, looking at the burning-down candle on the dresser. "Thank you."

Samira touched his arm, squeezing gently, rubbing, and didn't miss how he leaned into her touch, relaxing just a little. "Come on. We'll get this done, make the bed again, and see if we can get you back to sleep for another couple of hours. And, Jack?"

"Mm?" he asked, turning his head to look at her, all sharp lines and

weathered skin and tired, tired eyes.

“I’m glad I stayed. I’m glad I didn’t go.”

“Yeah,” he answered, reaching out and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “So am I, Samira. So am I.”

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